

Acts 5–8: Judea and Samaria under Christ

Last week we saw how the resurrected, ascended king empowered all his people to declare his kingship and live as his kingdom (Acts 1–2).

When they used Jesus' authority, they upset those in power in Jerusalem. It didn't stop them: they kept declaring Jesus' kingship and living like everyone in the kingdom mattered to the king (Acts 3–4).

Any questions or thoughts on Acts 1–4 before we continue?

Acts 5: Representing Christ's leadership

Pretence to gain approval (5:1-11)

Ananias and Sapphira made a tragic choice. Do you know their story?

Chapter 4 ended with the believers living as a community where *no one claimed any of their possessions was their own* (4:32). The Holy Spirit was leading them to live like Jesus. He claimed nothing as his own, not even his life! Together they embody Christ's leadership: *with great power his apostles were giving evidence of the resurrection of Master Jesus whose great generosity was on them all* (4:33).

Barnabas—the guy who later travels with Paul—sets the example:

Acts 4:36-37 (NIV)

³⁶ Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

That's positive peer pressure, encouraging others to live unselfishly. But peer pressure can be a problem: it works by gaining the group's approval:

Acts 5:1-2 (NIV)

¹ Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. ² With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

Peter calls them out:

Acts 5:3-4 (NIV)

³ Then Peter said, “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ⁴ Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God.”

The problem is the pretence. They present as if motivated by the Holy Spirit, but they're actually motivated by seeking honour. The Holy Spirit reveals their mixed motives, so the deception won't permeate the community.

When is it right to confront someone publicly like this? (Compare 1 Timothy 5:20.)

The outcome is tragic. *When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died* (verse 5). When Sapphira came in and collaborated his story, she also died (verse 10). *Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events* (verse 11).

Your thoughts? How would you react if something like this happened in our church?

.....

In the early days of the Sinai covenant, two of Aaron's sons died because they presented an offering to the LORD using fire from elsewhere. **Nadab and Abihu** died for dishonouring God. God insisted, *"Among those who approach me, I will be proved holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honoured"* (Leviticus 10:3).

Ananias and Sapphira died for presenting a deceptive offering, one intended to benefit themselves by deceiving the Holy Spirit and the community. It's terrifying:

Acts 5:5, 10-11 (NIV)

⁵ When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ...

¹⁰ At that moment, [Sapphira] fell down at his feet and died. ... ¹¹ Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

In the new covenant, we're all priests representing God's character. Men and women, we're all equally accountable.

Embodying Jesus' kingship (5:12-16)

In Acts 5:11, Luke introduces the word *church* for the first time. It's a strange word to choose. Greek had words for religious gatherings, political gatherings, and general purpose meetings. The word for a religious gathering in a Jewish setting was "synagogue" (*synagōgē*). But early Christians described themselves as an *ekklēsia*.



An *ekklēsia* was a political gathering (Acts 19:32, 39, 41). In Athenian democracy, the *ekklēsia* was the assembly that gathered to make the city's decisions. In the Jewish story, the *ekklēsia* was the assembly under God's leadership in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 9:10; Acts 7:38), and later the assembly that gathered around the king (1 Chronicles 13:2-4; 29:1, 10, 20; 2 Chronicles 6:3, 12-13).

Why did Christians choose this word? And how could they use it for something that was not a meeting in one location? Sometimes it's *the ekklēsia throughout Judea and Galilee and Samaria* (Acts 9:31).

The *ekklēsia* seems to be the gathering around King Jesus. It's located in him rather than any one geographical setting. The church (*ekklēsia*) is community that embodies and honours the government of God's Messiah.

The **apostles** are therefore the ambassadors sent to declare the king's authority. They enact his reign as the community where *no one claimed that any of their possessions was their own* (4:32). They implement his reign over the earth with *signs and wonders*—miraculous interventions that point people to his caring governance (5:12).

In honouring the king like this, *they were highly regarded by the people* (5:13). Isn't that what Ananias and Sapphira craved and tried to gain through trickery?

The community of King Jesus is not something you join for its benefits. The gospel is not a commodity to be marketed. The good news is that Jesus Christ is Lord, so it costs you everything. It requires you to trust his leadership. That's what it means to *believe in the Lord*:

Acts 5:13–14 (NIV)

¹³ No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.

He refocuses us from personal gain to divine kingship, so he can change the world through us (verses 15-16).

Jesus' authority is a threat to those in power (5:17-42)

If God has given the kingship to Jesus, his authority is a threat to those who claim to be in power. If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar and the temple leaders are not.

Many die in wars as nations and rulers fight to assert their power. Many who proclaim Jesus as Lord have been killed by rulers and churches asserting their authority in the last 2000 years. It's a life-and-death issue.

But just like our Leader, we don't fight back. God calls humanity to recognize his Anointed, but he doesn't force his king on the world. God gives life:

Acts 5:17-20 (Tom Wright's translation)

¹⁷ Then the high priest got up, and all who were with him, namely the group called the 'Sadducees'. They were filled with righteous indignation, ¹⁸ and seized the apostles and put them in the public jail. ¹⁹ But an angel of the Lord came in the night, opened the prison doors, and brought them out.

²⁰ 'Go and take your stand in the Temple', he said, 'and speak all the words of this **Life** to the people.'

Sadducees don't believe in life after death. But next morning Jesus' messengers are back like their resurrected king. They're telling everybody all the words of *Life*.

How do you stop that? They were furious and wanted to put them to **death** (verse 33).

Acts 5:34-39 (NIV)

³⁴ But a Pharisee named **Gamaliel**, a teacher of the law, ... ³⁵ addressed the Sanhedrin: "...³⁸ Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. ³⁹ But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

Given his background in God's Law and the way God had released the apostles from the Sanhedrin's jail, Gamaliel warns that *fighting against God* would be futile. He was also Paul's tutor (Acts 22:3).

Acts 5:40-42 (NIV)

⁴⁰ They ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

⁴¹ The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. ⁴² Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

So what is the gospel, according to the apostles?

.....
.....
.....

Acts 6: Sharing his authority care

Everyone cared for (6:1-7)

Acts 6:1 (NIV)

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

In a culture where women can't work, a widow with no extended family had few options. There are many thousands of believers now (4:4), and they're enacting Jesus' kingship by caring for each other.

The majority of Jews were still living outside Palestine. These are the *Hellenistic* (Greek-speaking) Jews who discovered Jesus as the Christ at festivals like Pentecost and then stayed. They feel they're not being treated as well as the locals.

How do the apostles address this issue? How do they ensure everyone's needs are met, without trying to do it all themselves? What is their calling? (verses 3-4).

.....

Everyone involved (6:8-15)

Jesus authorized his apostles with his authority. They're mediators between heaven and earth, appealing to heaven for people, and declaring heaven's message for earth (verse 4).

That's why God performed signs and wonders through the apostles (2:43; 3:6; 5:12-16). How does that change as the apostles share their authority with others? (6:8; 8:6; 9:17).

.....

So, it's no longer just the apostles who are viewed as the enemy. What accusations are levelled against Stephen? (6:11-14)

.....

Moses delivered God's Law at Sinai, so *blasphemy against Moses and God* (verse 11) would be claiming that Jesus has authority to establish a different covenant kingdom. His authority declared, "You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you ..." (Matthew 5:21, 27, 33, 38, 43). Do you see any other similarities between the accusations against Jesus and Stephen? (Matthew 26:60-61)

.....

.....

The question is, which group represents heaven's authority?
Who looks like heaven's messenger here? (verse 15)

Acts 7: Stephen dies like his Lord

Stephens summarizes the story of God's people (7:1-53)

Stephen acknowledges the Sanhedrin as family (7:2), finding common ground with them in the family story. It starts with Abraham: his trust in what God promised, and the sufferings the patriarchs endured (verses 2-8).

One of Jacob's sons was rejected, handed over to a foreign power because the brothers were jealous. They tried to get rid of him, but **Joseph** received the authority his father intended (verses 9-10). Joseph used that authority to save the family as they joined him (verses 11-16). Is Stephen saying this story is still playing out with Jesus?

Israel's story has always been the life-versus-death struggle:

- God increased Jacob's family, while Pharaoh decreed death (verses 17-19).
- God gave **Moses** life, keeping him alive in Pharaoh's household (verses 20-22).
- Moses tried killing to get justice for his people, but they rejected him, leaving him vulnerable to Pharaoh (23-29).
- Only when Moses met God at the flaming bush was Moses ready to enact God's sovereign authority: returning to the jaws of death to save the very people who had rejected him (verses 30-36).
- *Words of life* come to us in what Moses received from God. And Moses said God would send *another prophet like me* (verses 37-38, Deuteronomy 18:15).

But when God provided this new "Moses" would God's people follow? While Moses was up the mountain hearing from God, the Israelites stopped following his leadership and made a god to suit themselves (verses 39-41).

That's the issue that ultimately caused Israel to fall. They gave themselves to the nations and their gods. That's why God sent them into exile (verses 42-43).

And that's when the temple fell. The tabernacle was *a dwelling place for the God of Jacob* to live among his people. Then Solomon built a temple, knowing it could not contain the Most High (1 Kings 8:27). Like Isaiah 66:1-2 says, God's reign reaches beyond any humanly constructed temple (verses 44-50).

So, it's no surprise when those who run the temple do not represent God's authority. It was like that in Jeremiah's day when God overturned the first temple. They had a history of killing the prophets who promised *the one who would do right*.

This is exactly how Jesus confronted the temple leaders who rejected his authority (Matthew 23:33–24:30). Stephen accuses the temple leaders of *betraying and murdering* the one who did right for his people (verses 51-53).

Stephen dies for his king (7:54-60)

Stephen knows they're threatening death, but he won't be diverted from declaring Jesus' authority:

Acts 7:55-56 (NIV)

⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

How do you understand this revelation the Holy Spirit gave Stephen?
What does it mean to say Jesus has this position at God's right hand?
Why does Stephen call Jesus *the son of man*?

.....
The first to die for proclaiming Jesus as king is not one of the twelve. The apostles rejoiced that they'd been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name (5:41), but Stephen is the first to be killed to silence the message that Jesus reigns.

Even as Stephen receives death from his enemies, he's following his life-giving Lord:

Luke 23:46 Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

Acts 7:59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

Luke 23:34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Acts 7:60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

Many murders follow Stephen's: killings by temple authorities, Roman authorities, church authorities, and other religions that give death to their enemies.

Later in first century, John saw a vision of *the souls of those who had been slain because of the world of God and the testimony they had maintained. They cried out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord ..."* (Revelation 6:9-10). They were told to wait; others would be *killed just as they had been*.

What does it say about how Jesus serves as king in a world where people fight for power? What does it say about our vulnerability as we serve him?

.....
Following Jesus is a choice between Life and Death.

Acts 8: Philip spreads the good news

A young man named Saul was in the mob that murdered Stephen. He wasn't throwing the stones, but he was *holding their coats* (7:58). *He approved of their killing him* (8:1).

To Saul, the claim that Jesus is Lord undermined the temple authorities, the faith as he understood it. He devoted himself to stamping out the community that gathers around King Jesus, to prevent the claims of Jesus' kingship taking root:

Acts 8:3 (NIV)

Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

We'll come back to Saul next week (Acts 9), but please notice how Jesus' followers respond. Rather than fight back, they leave their homes and go elsewhere.

And what do you think they take with them?

Acts 8:4 (NIV)

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

Samaria receives the good news (8:1-8)

Like Stephen, Philip was part of the team the apostles shared their authority with (6:5). He went north to Samaria, between Judea and Galilee.

In the days of the divided kingdom, Samaria was capital of Israel (the northern nation). It fell to Assyria, and was repopulated with people from elsewhere (2 Kings 17:24).

God had promised to restore his protection over them through a descendant of King David: *"I will restore David's fallen shelter"* (Amos 9:11). *Afterward the Israelites will return to seek the LORD their God and David their king* (Hosea 3:5).

That was more than 700 years earlier. Imagine what it meant when someone arrived declaring the anointed king had come, enacting his liberating reign:

Acts 8:5–8 (NIV)

⁵ Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. ⁶ When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. ⁷ For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralysed or lame were healed. ⁸ So there was great joy in that city.



What was *the gospel* as Philip proclaimed it? There are two phrases in **verse 12**:

-
-

Do Philip's two phrases mean essentially the same thing?
Is this how you understand the gospel?

How did people respond to the gospel? Why this response? Why emphasize that *both men and women* became citizens of God's reign in his anointed?

.....
Samaritans joining the kingdom of the Jewish Messiah was unexpected, even though God had promised to reunite both parts of the divided kingdom under a Davidic king (Ezekiel 37:15-28), and Jesus said his kingdom would spread from Jerusalem to *all Judea and Samaria* (Acts 1:8).

The apostles came to check out this unusual development:

Acts 8:14–17 (NIV)

¹⁴ When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. ¹⁵ When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Peter and John see that Christ's kingship has been extended to Samaritans as well as Jews, to women as well as men. Every citizen of Jesus' reign participates in his anointing as king, so they pray for that anointing on these Samaritans also.

Dealing with trickery (8:9-25)

There's at least one person who wants divine power for his own benefit.

Simon the sorcerer lives for people's accolades (verse 10). He buys his magic tricks:

Acts 8:18–22 (NIV)

¹⁸ When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money ¹⁹ and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

²⁰ Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! ²¹ You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God.

²² Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. ²³ For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."

Why does Peter curse him with *perishing* along with his money? (verse 20)
Is it wrong to sell people the gospel as something to benefit themselves?
How do we address the issue of mixed motives?

.....
.....

An Ethiopian government official receives the good news (8:26-40)

God directs Philip to speak to an Ethiopian: *an important official in charge of all the treasure of the Kandake, the Ethiopian queen* (verse 27).

This is a big step beyond the Samaritans who had some connection to the Jewish king if you went back 900 years. But an Ethiopian? That's a completely different ethnic group.

The guy is reading Isaiah as he's chauffeured home. He's up to what we call Isaiah 53, a passage about *a sheep being led to the slaughter, someone whose life was taken from the earth*. He's not sure whether Isaiah was telling his own story or someone else's. *Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the gospel about Jesus* (verse 35).

The guy wants to be baptized as a follower of Jesus. "*What could stand in the way?*" he asks (verse 36). For one thing, he's a gentile. For another, he works for another ruler. And when he went to Jerusalem to worship he was very aware that under the Sinai covenant, no eunuch *could enter the ekklesia of the Lord* (Deuteronomy 23:1).

None of these barriers matter now. Together, they went into the water, and Philip baptized him (verse 38). They never see each other again, but the good news of the Christ is on the way to Africa.

Philip is "found" at Azotus, the old Philistine town of Ashdod (verse 40). There's no hint on how he got there. Philip works his way north, *gospelling in all the towns until he came to Caesarea* in the northern region near Mount Carmel.

Reflection

What questions do you have over Acts 5–8?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

How is the kingdom of Christ spreading? Who is included?

.....
.....
.....
.....

Every attempt to stop the proclamation of Jesus' authority has failed:

- *If it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God (5:39)*
- Outlawing speaking in Jesus' name and locking up his apostles didn't work. The temple authorities were *at a loss, wondering what this might lead to (5:24)*.
- Saul's mission to *destroy the church by dragging off men and women to put them in prison* did not work (8:3). It ended up spreading the message of Jesus' kingship beyond Jerusalem. You can't put a fire out by spreading it in the grass.

By Acts 8, the message of Jesus' kingship has spread to both parts of the divided kingdom of Israel: Judea and Samaria. It's even started to spread beyond to the borders, into a foreign nation, gentile territory in Africa.

What else inspired you in Acts 5–8?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

In preparation for next week, please read Acts 9–12. Meditate on how Christ brings his enemies under his authority, even people from the nations who had not previously been God's people.