

It's Simple Really... Change the World

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- [0 : 0 0] I'd never heard of Pui lentils until last week. Sales of Pui lentils have absolutely rocketed through the skies.
- And the reason, of course, is that Prince George in his new prep school, one day had for lunch smoked mackerel and they aforesaid Pui lentils.
- Well, certainly when I was in school in Paisley, when we had smacked mackerel, smock mackerel, we certainly didn't have Pui lentils, not even ordinary ones.
- It's the so-called star effect, isn't it? How something fairly mundane and even ordinary becomes quite phenomenal in the national consciousness.
- And of course, it's caused by the fact that some stardust has been sprinkled on it by a royal or some celebrity. So here we see in Acts chapter A the whole story, and it's a kind of anti-stardust effect, isn't it?
- [1 : 0 2] Because we see here the gospel begins to expand and indeed explode. The story of the Acts of the Apostles is how the gospel went from Jerusalem right the way to Rome, from a very closed, normalized Jewish world of Jerusalem, fairly conservative people, fairly traditional people, right through into the zany, Gentile, cosmopolitan world of Rome.
- Here we have in Acts chapter A a kind of station on that journey, but it's the kind of anti-stardust effect. Because look at some of the words in verses one to three.
- Execution, that's not a big word. When scattered, and then we have folk who were being ravaged, the church was ravaged, and men and women were dragged off and committed into prison.
- And so we get the picture there of how the church of Jesus Christ began. As I said, the kind of anti-stardust effect. It is out of persecution that the church grew.
- It is out of weakness that the church grew. It is out of people who were largely, in terms of this world's view, largely incompetent and certainly very, very weak.
- [2 : 2 2] And so the thing is that tonight that we are the heirs of these people. And I wonder do we recognize the connection between the zeal and enthusiasm of these early believers who literally, as the Bible said, turned the world upside down and us?
- But is it perhaps more the relationship between a kind of lion and a domesticated cat? And really at the end of the day a lion is just a big cat.
- But I wonder how we become domesticated in terms of our faith and where are we in this evangelistic thrust that we see here in Acts chapter eight?
- As we see ourselves as heirs of these people, to what extent do we look like them in this city of Edinburgh where we are today?
- I love going around cemeteries. Maybe it's a kind of the little bit of a Highland ancestry in me, but I get a lot of joy out of walking through cemeteries.
- [3 : 2 4] It's kind of Scottish thing we revel in misery. And one of the great cemeteries, of course, is Highgate in London where Karl Marx is buried.

And I've got this great quote about the Marx had. He said, the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways.

The point, however, is to change it. And I think that's a call for us tonight that all of us in this building, that we are called not just to theorize and philosophize about the world, but we are called to change the world.

And God has placed us here in this great city of Edinburgh for such a time as this. And our purpose is to change the city, at least that part of the city for which we have some degree of influence.

And so you see here the plan here. And the plan, indeed, the Acts of the Apostles, arguably, is a fulfilling of the contents page.

[4 : 28] And the contents page is in Acts 1-8, or at least the statement of the whole book. It says, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Algedea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

So that's the kind of introduction to what Acts is all about. It's like a stone falling in the middle of a pond and the ripples go right out to the very edge.

And here we are 2,000 years on at the edge of that ripple effect here in the city of Edinburgh. And of course the Gospel is a great thing.

And what we see here is the beginning of the urbanization of the church. The Acts of the Apostles, of course, shows how the Gospel goes to the big cities.

It goes to Jerusalem, and now we have this city of Samaria. The kind of urban-centric world that is developing. Now there's lots of places out there that are important.

[5 : 34] It's not just cities that are important, but in the plan of God we see that cities have got a very unique part in God's great plan for us.

And so the idea tonight is, again, by way of introduction, that we have all been called to the city of Edinburgh, not just to think about it and not just to admire it, but in a God-given way we have been called to change it.

However, we've got to ask ourselves to what extent is evangelism passionate? And I've got to ask myself, not just because Derek asked me to speak on mission tonight, not just because I'm the kind of mission director of the denomination, but in practical terms have we almost become almost practical universalists?

In other words, this kind of tacit understanding that at the end of the day everybody's going to be saved and there is no evangelistic impulse to go out and tell people of Jesus.

And in fact, there is a rather subtle subtext that says that evangelism is actually arrogant. Who are we to tell people what to do?

[6 : 49] This morning I was going to church and I happened to listen, I think, to the religious program on Radio Scotland. And I was interviewing Mahatma Gandhi's grandson.

And he was talking there about the arrogance of us actually asking anyone to worship anyone. But isn't that the heart of our faith?

And I wonder perhaps subtly, do we, we bought into that idea that evangelism is arrogance? And so we can proclaim the role of the family, we can proclaim the position of the poor, but that all these things are legitimate and indeed all these things are incredibly important and arise out of the gospel.

In fact, we'll see later that social justice is part of this passage. But the core of the gospel is we preach Christ crucified. There is a people there who need to hear about Jesus.

And unless they hear about Jesus, they will all likewise, as the A.V. says, they will likewise perish. And so we see here a couple of unlikely evangelists, we have this man, Philip and Stephen.

[8 : 08] They weren't natural administrators. They were natural evangelists, sorry. They were administrators. They were guys who were more at home with, you know, Excel files and working through processes.

They were men of the office. And yet we find that God called them to be men of evangelistic zeal. And as we'll see, evangelistic effectiveness.

Again just another little word by way of introduction before we move on. Notice the wider context. Verse one is there arose on that day a great persecution against the church.

But we all know that persecution is futile with the church. It's like, remember these dandelions? You know, when you were young, these dandelions, I don't know if you ever played this game.

You held up, who loves me, who loves me not, or she loves me, she loves me not. And depending on who the girl was, depending on the power of the breath that was expelled, but the spores went all over the place.

[9 : 16] And that's what persecution is like with the church. It's like a dandelion being blown and the spores go all over the place. And the effect of the gospel spreads.

Someone who was converted in the African revival in the 1950s said this, during what was called the Mama Crisis in Kenya, where Derek is just now.

When they come for you at night and threaten to tie a sack over your head and rob you in the river. Then you know whether Jesus Christ means everything to you or whether he means nothing at all.

I wonder what about us tonight? Has our faith become perhaps a little bit more like a gym membership? Being something that we do socially or something that gives us some social kudos or is it everything, is our faith, is our belief in Jesus Christ, our absolute everything?

Because we are the heirs of people for whom Jesus was everything. Let's look at the passage this evening. And as we look at the passage, I think we will notice very clearly, hopefully very clearly, four things.

[10 : 28] The first thing we notice here is courage. Notice here, verse 5, Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.

You notice here courage then because he went down to the city of Samaria. Well these words give very little away, but let's remember what the background was.

There was, shall we say, hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans. Everyone's heard the sermons on the parable of the good Samaritan.

Everyone's heard John chapter 4, the woman of Samaria. We all know that there's something going on here between the Jews and the Samaritans. But a thousand years previously, the very poorest of the Jewish people had married into the Canaanite people and they'd come up with this kind of weird religion.

They lived in this area where there was a kind of syncretistic, messy, weird folk religion. It was a perversion of Judaism.

[11 : 35] But if there's one thing the Jews didn't like, was anybody messing with their traditional religion. And so they hated the Samaritans. They were regarded as racially inferior and they were certainly regarded as heretics.

Indeed in one occasion there was a Jewish raid into Samaria to pull down the temple. Such was the hatred towards these Samaritan people.

And we find here that the question is, do Jews have anything to do with Samaritans? And the answer, the kind of answer, the expected answer was, of course not.

And so this was difficult for anyone who was Jewish, for anyone who was Christian to go into this area. That's why I'm saying that courage was necessary.

They were people who had to be willing to set aside all racial and cultural prejudice for something that is far bigger.

- [12 : 39] They were people who had to realize that at the end of the day all the old historic racial barriers had to go. They were people who had to really intentionally work against their own prejudice to get the gospel out.

I wonder, I don't know, what prejudices do we have? I think it's probably true that those of you who are younger, millennials, have maybe a lot less prejudice than those of us who are baby boomers.

As baby boomers, we're full of prejudice. It's ridiculous. We've got all these stereotypes we think folk from Aberdeen are all mean.

We think that self-takes the worst football team in the entire world. We're prejudiced about all these things. You young folk are, I think, hopefully less prejudiced.

And yet, all of us have these little barriers, things that we don't like to do, things that we think are really, really horrible.

- [13 : 42] And we make judgments all the time. I've just been in a course last week. One of the things the course taught was observation, observing phenomena.

And it spoke about the need to bracket things. So in other words, that you observe something. And in your mind, you simply record what you see.

So if I see one of you looking at your phone, I clog that, I observe it. But I don't make any judgment.

You could be on Facebook. You could be texting someone. You could be following the passage on the Bible on your phone.

You could be doing any number of things. But what we've got to do is we've got to avoid prejudice. We've got to avoid judging you for that action because we don't know what's behind it.

- [14 : 44] And so that's known as bracketing. And here we see, in a sense, Philip is bracketing. He's got all this inbuilt prejudice towards the Samaritan, and he's put it in a bracket, and he's saying that doesn't matter.

What is important is the gospel. It doesn't matter what our class is. It doesn't matter what our religious experiences. Doesn't matter what our sexual orientation is.

Does not matter what our political outlook is. Everybody is to hear the gospel, and we have to embrace everybody in terms of telling them about Jesus, whether we either approve or disapprove or even like their lifestyle.

And that demands courage. So we see here that he goes into this Samaritan situation. Now this was really difficult because his friend Stephen had been stoned by a group of folk who didn't like that particular message, and this was a critical transition point.

Because this was the very first time in Acts where a significant non-Jewish people group were engaged with the gospel. And so just because one person was willing to break the trend, so the gospel began to spread.

- [16 : 07] And so we have this courage. But it's interesting who exercised the courage because the Bible says, look at verse 4, now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

That's really, really important. Michael Green's got this little book, Evangelism, in the first century. I think Michael Green is one of, even today is one of the most stimulating writers on Evangelism.

He says here, the little man has always been the prime agent in mission. It was those who were scattered that went about preaching the word.

This is significant because what we have here is a gospel movement. It is not just the idea that you go and bring someone to hear the great preacher.

The idea is not simply that you come and you take people into the church and you expose them to someone who is articulate and able to proclaim the gospel.

[17 : 10] That is not the model here. And this is the difference between kind of one action and a gospel movement. And that's what we have here. A movement is something which affects a group of people, not just one individual.

A movement is something which is infectious as people together speak and scatter the gospel themselves. And there are no, no go areas.

There is no people group who are beyond hearing the gospel. The fact of the Jewish folk, of course, the Samaritans there to hear the gospel.

What about our own day and age? What are the no go areas? I don't know, the new atheists? Maybe some of us know folk like that.

What are they? Listen, have courage. Just tell them, oh my Jesus, there is a power in simply telling the gospel.

[18 : 16] And the thing is that the people out there are more open than you can imagine. People out there, many folk are interested in spirituality and they are interested in authenticity.

And the churches that are growing, the churches that are lively in Scotland and throughout the world are churches that are courageous and have something interesting to say about the gospel and about Jesus.

So that's the first thing we notice here is courage. There's a second thing we notice here. And I'm calling that effectiveness. Because it's said there that the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip.

So they were interested. There was engagement. There was a response. And so what they did was very, very effective. In verse six, they paid close attention to what they said.

In verse seven, many were healed, in verse 12, men and women were baptized. Now it's interesting that there is a theme going through chapter eight.

[19 : 27] And the effectiveness is tied to this theme. Because what we have here is, again and again, we find that they are connected to the word. Look at verse four.

It mentions there the word. Look again at verse 14, it mentions the word. Look at verse 25, it says the word.

So that's the kind of theme. That's the evangelistic thread that's going through this particular chapter. And the thing there is that it says to them that they proclaimed to them the Christ.

There is power in proclamation of the Christ. I was in a church a few months ago and it was a very interesting situation.

At the end of it, I thought, there was something unusual about this particular service. It wasn't a Presbyterian reformed evangelical church.

[20 : 31] But at the end, I just thought, what was unusual about this situation? And then it's struggling that the unusual thing was that Christ was not mentioned, I think, apart from at the end of the pastoral prayer, the guy said the Christ's name and at the end of benediction.

Twice in the service, Christ's name was mentioned. I looked outside and I noticed it on the notice board that said that the services were taking place on the Sabbath.

So I thought, this is really interesting. The notice board says the services are on the Sabbath. The sermon has no reference to Jesus Christ. Am I in a synagogue? Is this Saturday?

And that's, I think, what many folk walking along the street would say. And it seemed to me to be heavy and it seemed to be very kind of moralistic.

Do this, do this, do this. And I was absolutely exhausted at the end of the service. You would not find that here with Philip in Acts 8.

[21 : 35] And the folk who were scattered, they proclaimed the Christ. And they proclaimed to them, the whole word Christ indeed is tied up with Christ as the Messiah.

Because the Samaritans had a very peculiar view of the Messiah. They kind of believed in a halfway Messiah. They thought that Moses was a kind of Messiah figure.

A liberator, a political animal, certainly. But not a Messiah according to the House of David, a kind of Bible type Messiah.

And so we find here that this is our trump card, if you pardon the expression. I don't think that's a great phrase to use these days. But this is the thing that really makes the gospel advance.

Is that we preach Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ, the most remarkable person who ever lived. The man whose life is stunningly beautiful and someone who is above reproach.

[22 : 39] And when we preach Christ, we can't go wrong. I think it was Michael Green who says, wherever they went, Christians were opposed as anti-social, atheistic, and depraved.

Their message proclaimed a crucified criminal. And nothing could have been less calculated to win them converts. Green says, worse still, this worship of a crucified Messiah was distinctively blasphemous.

The Old Testament made it perfectly clear that anyone hanging on a stake was resting under the curse of God. And yet it's counter-cultural, counter-intuitive that Jesus is fascinating, that Jesus is compelling, that Jesus is someone who is worthy of certainly attention and from our perspective honor.

How can a preacher be boring? A boring preacher ought to be put in jail because their subject matter is so interesting and fascinating.

And so when you get into a discussion with someone, Acts 8 says that what is a really good theme is to speak of Jesus, not to just go straight into some kind of culture war, moralistic battle, but to speak of Jesus.

[24 : 03] Because Fogg will say all the time, yeah, the church is full of hypocrites. And we can just put our hands up and say, absolutely, why not join us? It's a little bit self-righteous sometimes to say, oh, the church is full of hypocrites.

There's not an ounce of hypocrisy in me. Therefore, I'm not going to join the church. The church is full of sinners and there will be faults with churches. I don't know most of you.

Some of you have perhaps come in here bruised and battered and you have received bruises and a battering from the church. There's all sorts of abuse out there and many folks suffer from religious abuse and that's a thing.

And when we come to Jesus, there's that lovely verse in the Bible that says, a bruised reed, he will not break, and a smoldering candle, he will not finally snub out.

He says, come to me, oh, you are weary and they're heavy laden and I will give you rest.

[25 : 11] Take my yoke upon you for my burden is light. The Gospel is about Jesus.

He is the Messiah. He is the one who has come to lead us. And folk are constantly looking for a Messiah.

We see that in the political life when the whole Obama thing was kicking off in the US. People were also using the language of Messiahship. When the new guy came on his Republican throne, they used the same language.

This is someone who's going to make America great again. Someone who's going to turn the cog back. We have it here in our own political system. We're looking for a redeemer.

They proclaim Jesus as Messiah. Now this is a movement. This is a movement. What I mean by that is that they did lots of things.

[26 : 14] They proclaimed the word. And in verse seven and eight, I guess you could say, they engaged in justice ministry. You see the word and social justice went together in verse seven and eight.

You've got to do this. Because especially in a background that's antagonistic. What you see here is a movement. What do we mean by a movement?

Well, a movement involves many people. And a movement involves many techniques. If the only instrument you have is a hammer, then everything you touch looks like a nail.

And too many churches use simply one hammer to hit the various nails. In the gospel, in a gospel movement, you've got lots of things.

You've got folk like Philip proclaiming the gospel. You've got the trained apostles back in Jerusalem giving the backup. You've got the ordinary people gossiping the gospel.

[27 : 20] You get them proclaiming the word of God in terms of preaching like we're doing tonight. You get ordinary folks speaking to their neighbors. You get folk in the Archæopagus in the places of public debate.

You get folk in the public square. You've got all sorts of things. That's what a gospel movement is about. That there are many ways out there to proclaim the word.

And probably the least effective are just simple programs. I passed an institution recently. And I know that the institution is a kind of failing.

It's not going anywhere. There's no sense of direction. There's no strategy. It's lost its vision. And they've just put up a poster outside, organizing a Christianity-explored course.

That's great, of course. But you feel, is that just another program to see if we can keep the thing going for a few more months?

[28 : 22] No, a gospel movement is not just about programs. It's about people who are passionate about Jesus and who are telling others.

And that's the thing that struck me recently. In my day job, I go around talking to churches, how to be effective strategically. I talk to churches about how to engage with culture.

And we're seeing a degree of change. We're seeing a degree of movement as many of our churches are becoming more cultural, savvy, and aware.

But a huge gap is in getting our people to just tell their story of how they came to Christ, that people will be witnesses.

So we've seen courage. We've seen effectiveness. Thirdly, let us notice here the word I've used is conflict. Notice verse 9, but there was a man named Simon. You see, all things are going well.

[29 : 21] They've scattered. They've proclaimed the gospel. The crowds paid attention. Verse 6, verse 7, unclean spirits are crying out. There's healing.

In verse 7, verse 8, there is much joy in that city. But verse 9, there was a man named Simon. There's always a guy named Simon or a girl named Simon.

There's always hassle when you proclaim the gospel. Always, always, always. So this guy, Simon, he is a sorcerer.

He is a little bit of a self-styled celebrity. Verse 9, it says there, he amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was someone great.

He was influential. Verse 11, they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed him with his magic. That's very contemporary, isn't it?

[30 : 25] Someone who says that they're great. Someone who amazes people with their magic, with their charisma, with their personality. They followed him because he was amazing.

And he kind of bought into this Christian thing because he thought that he could make some money. And he was affected by the gospel. Verse 13, it looks like language, even Simon himself believed.

He kind of intellectually thought, oh, there is something in here. And then we've got this stunning offer in verse 18 when he says, give me this power, let me pay this money so that I too may lay hands on someone.

Evangelism is exciting and paradigm breaking, but it can also lead to conflict.

It goes with the territory. But a couple of things here. Let's recognize that when we witness there may be a negative effect.

[31 : 29] And so it's perfectly understandable that those who are emotionally intelligent, you don't like to elicit a negative effect, but it's going to come.

And can I just say that if there is a negative effect, always let it be because of the gospel, not because of our abrasive personality.

And so I'm just saying here that there is always conflict when there is evangelism. And evangelism is messy and it is complex.

So we've seen your courage. We've seen effectiveness. We've seen conflicts. But then fourthly and finally, the last word I'm using here is authenticity.

Maybe those of you who are theologically astute and maybe not have noticed something in chapter eight is quite interesting because we believe that when someone becomes a Christian at that point, they're filled with the spirit.

[32 : 30] There's not a kind of two-stage process. You become a Christian and then you have a later baptism of the spirit. That's what the Bible clearly teaches. However, what you have here is something unusual, don't you, because there is some discussion amongst the people back there in Jerusalem, whether the Samaritans had actually received the spirit.

They accepted the word of God and they were baptized, but did not yet receive the Holy Spirit. And this was unprecedented. I'm not going into the pros and cons of that tonight, we don't have much time left.

But what I find quite interesting here is that they went back to Jerusalem and the Jerusalem guys came up to see what was going on. And they went up and they saw what was happening in Samaria.

Just very briefly, why was this? The church of Jerusalem was very well established and that's where the apostles were. So it was the real deal.

It was like the mother church. So Jerusalem was about like St. Columbus. The old wise apostles were on the staff there.

[33 : 53] So it was kind of like Derrick and Cory, you know, the old wise Gandalf figures. And then there's a movement of God up in Cornerstone or Esk Valley.

And it's been achieved under folk who are a little bit edgy and stuff happens. And so the guys from Jerusalem go to see what is happening.

Now I think and at that point the Holy Spirit comes. Now there's a lot of things happening here. One of course is that the racial divide is so huge.

I can't tell you how big a deal this is. But they needed to make sure or the Holy Spirit was there visibly bringing folk together because only the Holy Spirit could reconcile Jew and Samaritan.

So they went down number one to see that it was a real deal. They went down to ensure that it was a real deal to help them. But here we see that the established church of Jerusalem can privy us and affirms the new church plant at Samaria.

[35 : 09] Because they needed to make sure it had apostolic authority. I'm just going to make one point here. Something's got to be real if it's church.

And so they've got to establish authenticity. That was the connection to the apostles. This is what we call apostolic succession. Not that you just lay hands on someone in a kind of magical way.

But the church that we have today is recognizably a Christian church. Church can be a little bit like Chinese whispers. You know, you say one sentence and you go around the room and by the end of the room you've got completely different sentences.

That's why it is so important that church has to conform to the franchise agreement made up by the apostolic doctrine that we find in the New Testament.

So there's a degree of quality control here. That's why there is authenticity. The line of apostolic succession is not priestly but doctrinal.

[36 : 16] Times gone you've been very, very patient. Let's conclude. So we have been called, all of us are being called in this act's eight way to scatter abroad and to spread the gospel.

In my wanderings through Highgate Cemetery I noticed another grave and it was a grave of the scientist Michael Faraday.

And he said this, speculations, I have none. I am resting on certainties.

I know whom I have believed and I'm persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.

Buried very close to one another the revolutionary marks on the scientist Faraday who is resting on certainties.

[37 : 17] There are many things that we are uncertain of, many things that we are not sure of. But one thing that we are sure of is that Jesus Christ is today as he has always been the power of God unto salvation and that he is life changing, paradigm breaking, sin forgiving.

And this is what our world, this is what our cities need more than anything. The wonderful thing is that we have been given this privilege.

We are not one of the big people who commands audiences of thousands in the convention. We are one of the little people that spread a big message.

May we all see blessing in this spreading by the little people of the big message. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for who you are.

We bless you for the power of the gospel. May we engage in mission and evangelism in the power of the Spirit. And may there be signs falling.

[38 : 34] Help us to give you all the glory and to enjoy you always. Amen.