

ACTS 2016
Part 8
“Multiply”
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Good Morning Church! You can turn in your Bibles to Acts Chapter 8:1. I just want to refer to the baptism announcement we just saw. Our next baptism is going to be on Easter Sunday. What better way to celebrate the resurrection of the Lord Jesus than to witness those who have placed their faith in Him and are taking that symbolic step that baptism represents of being buried with Him and raised to new life in Christ?

So if you are a believer in Jesus, if you have given your life to Him and are in a relationship with Him, but haven't taken the important step to be baptized, I would encourage you to sign up for those baptism classes that are occurring over the next few weeks in preparation for Easter Sunday.

Last week I was on our men's retreat. You should be encouraged; I was with some wonderful men from our church. We had a great time where we ate lots of meat and not just physical meat – also in God's Word – so it was a good time together.

I woke up last Thursday (two Thursdays ago, right before the retreat) with a sore calf. So I started to stretch out my calf muscle wondering if I had injured myself snowboarding or something like that.

And as I was speaking on the retreat, I was medicating with Advil to numb the pain, but it continued to increase and my calf continued to get larger and larger.

So I was getting a little concerned. I brought a massager with me – you know those electric massagers that thump your leg – so I'm grinding it into my calf muscle. I'm pushing it to try and get this muscle to release.

I went to the doctor this last Monday to get it checked out and it turns out that I have a blood clot in my left leg and they have me on blood thinners now.

If you were praying for me last Thursday and Friday as I was hammering my calf with a massager, I just thank God that the blood clot didn't release and go to my lung. And being at MBC where hospitals aren't close, it could have been really bad, so I thank God for life, and appreciate that those moments where you are urged to pray for someone and you don't know why? They work.

I feel great now other than a little bit of a limp but I trust that God continues to watch over and the blood thinners will do their work.

But it means that I can't travel for a few months and we had a trip to Lebanon planned, Charles and I, to profile some of the work amongst refugees in Lebanon, but unfortunately we are going to have to postpone that to a later date.

So thank you for your prayers. I am doing well. I wanted you to hear it from me. Not that this church wrestles with the rumor mill going, but just sometimes broken telephone results in all kinds of stories.

So thank you for your prayers.

Last week Dave shared from the book of Acts, and we left Acts during the Christmas season and into the New Year, but I want to come back to our journey through Acts. We are going to be looking at Acts up until Easter Sunday, at which point we will wrap up our study of this book.

And so just to refresh your memory, the journey we have been on, Jesus meets with His disciples after His resurrection, before the Day of Pentecost, and in Acts 1:8 says this to His gathered group of disciples,

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

And so we looked at Acts Chapter 1 through 7 and we looked at how the apostles were proclaiming this New Covenant relationship that God wanted to have with His people, and how predominantly they were sharing that message amongst Jerusalem.

And we had left Acts at Chapter 7 where Stephen testified before the Sanhedrin that they were resisting the Holy Spirit.

But prior to that there had been this growing movement and growth of the church predominantly within Jerusalem that was challenging the Sanhedrin.

And Dave mentioned last week in Acts 5:28 we read that the Sanhedrin says to Peter and John, when they are brought before them,

“We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.”

And so as you study the first seven chapters of Acts you see the apostles with this mandate given to them by Jesus, endowed with the power of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, filling Jerusalem with this teaching.

But now Jerusalem is full. And there has been this growing tension between the religious leaders, who are holding to the Old Covenant relationship with God, and this New Testament church and the apostles as they proclaim Jesus.

And it culminates in Chapter 7 when Stephen appears before the Sanhedrin. They don't like what he said when he says to them, "You always resist the Holy Spirit," and on that day a great persecution breaks out against the church, starting with the stoning of Stephen.

They stone him to death and in Acts Chapter 8:1 we read this:

"And Saul approved of their killing him.

"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

"Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.

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

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

"Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there.

"When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said.

"For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed.

"So there was great joy in that city."

What I want to look at in our time together is really just two things: the persecution of man and the power of God.

So this massive persecution breaks out against the church and Luke does an interesting contrast in the opening verses of Chapter 8. When this great persecution breaks out against the church, he says, "Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him, but Saul went from house to house dragging off men and women, throwing them in prison, trying to destroy the church."

Saul, who is driven by a religious ideologue, thinking that he is defending God from this cult, starts to work against the very God that he thinks he is defending.

And Luke says godly men, those who are walking with God, those who understand this new covenant relationship; the godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.

And Saul, thinking that he is defending God, is actually working against Him. And in Acts Chapter 9 (we will look at it in a couple weeks), we see how God moves to seize Saul and convert him to Paul.

But oftentimes the rapid spread of the Gospel takes place when people are trying to rid the earth of it. When we look throughout church history, seasons where there is intense persecution, seasons where there is state sponsored persecution against the church, are oftentimes seasons where there is rapid growth within the church.

And for seven chapters the imperative that Jesus had given to the disciples in Acts Chapter 1 hadn't moved beyond Jerusalem. He said that they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth.

But for seven chapters we observe them staying within Jerusalem. And this great persecution breaks out and it's as though the church is pushed into mission, because as they scatter, wherever they go, they start to proclaim the Word of God, they start to share about who Jesus is.

And this marks a huge shift in the book of Acts, the expansion of the church amongst the Gentiles. It also marks a reshaping of the apostles' perspective as to who the Gospel is for.

And as Acts unfolds and God continues to spread His church throughout the whole known world, Jerusalem doesn't become the epicenter of the church only; Antioch also starts to take form.

And so when Jesus meets with His disciples in Acts Chapter 1 He doesn't explain all this to them. He simply says to them, "Abide in Me, and I have given you the great command: Love God, love others, and the Great Commission: Go into all the world and make disciples, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you, and lo, I am with you always."

That is what He had instructed them. He didn't tell them how the church would grow, He didn't tell them what exactly would take place, He didn't warn them of the persecution – He somewhat did when He said, "if the world hates Me, I have news for you: it's going to hate you also."

And so when this persecution breaks out, the apostles remain in Jerusalem, but the rest of the church, as they are scattered, we are told in Verse 4,

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

They were forcibly displaced from their homes by a terrorist movement, for all intents and purposes, and wherever they went, because they are Jesus people, they preached the Word.

I just want to look at three things as to how the power of God moved and it's these: where is the Gospel moving in power in this chapter, what is the effect of the Gospel, and who is God using for the spread of His kingdom?

So that's what we are going to look at in our time together.

The Lord uses His scattered church and leads Philip to another city that is a spiritual center of worship for the region of Samaria. Now there is a lot of animosity between orthodox Jews and Samaritans in Jesus' day.

When we read the Gospels we see that. Jews did not associate with Samaritans. And it goes back to a conflict that has existed for hundreds of years. When the northern tribes of Israel separated from the southern tribes, there was a lot of animosity between the two groups.

And Jeroboam, who became the king of the north, set the whole northern tribes on a journey away from God. And God would plead with them through multiple prophets sent to them to return to Him. But he did such an effective job of putting them on a path away from God that when you read about the kings in the northern tribes and sometimes when you read the Old Testament it says whether a king was good or a king was bad; when it comes to the kings of the north, they were all bad. There was not one good king in the northern tribes of Israel.

And after multiple warnings to His people in the region of Samaria to the north of Jerusalem in the Old Testament, we know that the Assyrians exiled the northern tribes to Assyria. And when they did that, what they took was citizens from throughout their kingdom and repopulated the region of Samaria with subjects from all over their kingdom.

And these subjects, when they came into the region of Samaria, brought with them the worship of all kinds of gods. There was a multitude of gods that were worshiped in the region of Samaria.

So when the Jews in the south and in Jerusalem, who held to the Books of the Law, and who held to the Torah; when they were exiled to Babylon and returned, they didn't intermarry or intermix with the people of Samaria because they saw them as predominantly half-Jews or a hodge podge of all kinds of spirituality that was worshiped within that region.

So imagine hundreds of years of that growing conflict between these two groups. So when Philip is led by the Holy Spirit - scattered by a persecution, led by the Holy Spirit to a city in Samaria - to the New Testament Jew, this would have been mind-blowing. This would have been scandalous.

This is a region that, I dare say, the Sanhedrin who are persecuting the church; they have no real power or authority and their minions couldn't go there to persecute the church because Jews didn't associate with Samaritans.

And as Philip steps into this city, led by the Holy Spirit, this would have been a region from the outside; this city may not be the community that the apostles would have imagined would have been ripe to receive the Gospel.

From the outside this city in Samaria may have looked like people who were the furthest from God, to the outside eye, because there would have been so much cultish practice in this city.

But God scatters His people and He leads Philip there.

But when I read through Acts Chapter 8 and I see that phenomenon and I think of what it would have been like for Philip to step into that space, thousands of years later it is a similar danger for us as a church today.

Oftentimes we look at the outward appearance of people and think that our city is so distant from God that their beliefs and practices are telling us that they want nothing to do with God. And so we start to distance ourselves from the dark places of our city. We start to avoid the uncomfortable situations because we have looked at how lost they are. We look at their behavior and we think there is no way that this person is going to be open and receptive to the message of Jesus.

But Philip steps into a place that very few others would go and God scatters him to this place, leads him to this place. And obediently, because he abides in Christ, he starts to share the Gospel in this city, in Samaria.

And as he proclaims the Gospel and who Jesus is, because Jesus is the light of the world, when Philip proclaims this Christ and the message of Jesus, there is a radical transformation in the city of Samaria.

Because Jesus sets people free, He starts to set people free in the city of Samaria as Philip starts to testify to who He is.

The spiritual forces of evil that held that city in its grasp start to be broken. Those who are possessed are set free. Those who are paralyzed are made well. Those who are lame are restored.

And we cannot judge from the outside someone's suitability for receiving the Gospel, can we? We are simply to proclaim who He is, and as we do so, it is His job to do a supernatural work that we cannot do, and to set the captives free.

But oftentimes when we look on the outward appearances, we come to a determination, if we look with natural eyes as to who is a suitable candidate or not, or how open they are or not.

There is a story of a young missionary pastor in northern India. His name was Pastor Suta. He was 25 years old and he was evangelizing in different towns in the north of India.

And he came to one town and there was fierce opposition to him sharing about Jesus. There was one elder of the village in particular that confronted him and said, "We are a Hindu village; we want nothing to do with this Jesus you are talking about. Take your Jesus and get out of our town." And he warned him not to come back, with other men warning him as well.

So Pastor Suta moved on to the next village, but then felt led by the Holy Spirit to return back to that village four days later. Four days later this village was celebrating a wedding ceremony and Pastor Suta walked into the village and he started to tell people about Jesus.

This same village elder, who warned him not to come back to this region and to this town, confronted him yet again and he said, "We warned you not to come back here. We are a Hindu village. We want nothing with your Jesus. Take your Jesus and go."

But then he started to become so enraged with this Pastor Suta who came back to him that he started to beat him. And other elders started to join in. And they beat that man to death. They stoned him, they clubbed him; they gave him a beating within an inch of his life. They dragged him out of the town and threw him into a deep pit, leaving him for dead.

That man who fiercely beat him and led the village elders in beating him, later that evening was eating dinner with his wife and was conscience stricken about what they had done to that 25 year old Christian.

And he started to share with his wife that he had warned him not to come back, that they were a Hindu village. But he said to her, "I don't know if he is alive or dead; we gave him such a beating."

And she said to him, "You need to go check and see if he is still alive."

So that's what he did in the middle of the night. He went out looking for Pastor Suta in the pit he had thrown him in. And he called out to him and there was no response.

So he climbed down into the pit, he checked for a pulse, saw that he was still alive and carried him all the way back to the town and back to his home.

And he had found his bag with his Gospel tracts in it and his Bible in it. And he and his wife started to nurse him back to health. And his wife said, "What are we going to do when he gets healthy again?"

He said, "We are going to send him from our village. If his God is real, his God will take care of him."

So that's what they did. They nursed him back to where he was strong enough to move. And Pastor Suta left the village, but four days later returned because God had told him to return.

And he started to share about Jesus. That very man who led the beating on Pastor Suta gave his life to Christ and attends Pastor Suta's church in that village today.

And see sometimes we look on the outside and we think there's no way they are open to the Gospel. But who are we to determine how God's power is going to move? Who are we to determine whether a Samaritan city, where all kinds of cultish practices take place, all kinds of darkness resides?

"Philip, go to Samaria."

"Where do You want me to go?"

"To Samaria."

And we just obey and follow. Abiding in Christ led Philip to the epicenter of spiritual darkness in the Samaritan city.

And Jerusalem's spiritual blindness took an Old Testament form where they were holding to the Old Testament covenant and therefore not entering into the New.

As Philip enters into this city, what is holding it is all kinds of misconceptions as to who God is, all forms of worship.

But both are equally possessed, paralyzed and left lame without the Gospel.

And Church, when I look at our city today, when I look at our world today, we are His body. And abiding in Christ and abiding in His will doesn't lead to ever-increasing levels of comfort and distance from the darkness; it oftentimes leads us into the dark places, not the well-lit places.

Our founder, Oswald Smith; I am reading one of his books called "The Challenge of Missions" and I took a number of statements that he made in that book, and there is a quote online that gathers a number of statements that he makes in that book. But I think it accurately reflects the heart with which this church was founded and birthed upon.

And Oswald Smith says this: *"This then is to be our vision, not the duplicating of existing missionary agencies; rather we are to work in places still untouched, unoccupied areas where Christ has not been named, the regions beyond farther, still farther into the night, the neglected fields. These are our watchwords, this our glorious mission."*

Isn't that a great statement? That is what this church was founded upon. As God is dwelling in Jerusalem and as the teaching of Jesus fills Jerusalem, God also thinks about the region of Samaria and Judea who haven't heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

He thinks of all the regions beyond that. And when you study the book of Acts, God is the One building His church as He leads His obedient servants to proclaim the Gospel in regions that haven't heard it yet, where Christ is least known.

And our founder, 90 years ago next year, founded this church with this as our heartbeat.

Why do we exist as a church? To reach out for the thousands of people who have never entered a church door.

That is why we support so many missionaries in so many different countries through our faith promise. That is why we send teams to Haiti or to India, throughout the world, because we want to be a part of His mission, going into difficult places, not going into ever-increasing levels of comfort.

You know when I read Oswald's statement, (I want to leave it up there for a moment) when I read that quote and I think of our modern North American church growth model, sometimes I

feel like our modern churches, the trajectory we are on in North America, I took Oswald's quote and wrote it with a bit of sarcasm as to how we think of church today sometimes.

So imagine Oswald writing something like this: "This then is to be our vision. We are to build huge church buildings with comfortable auditorium seating, where everyone feels comfortable, with state-of-the-art audio-visual services. We are to invite people to come to us, the regions we feel most comfortable in, where Christ is well known, farther still farther away from the night."

And sometimes when I look at our churches we are doing that very thing, individually and corporately. The difficult parts of the city where the possessed and the paralyzed and those who are stifled and afflicted by sin, the dark parts of our city – we don't want to live in them; we want to avoid them because for goodness' sake, we might get some sin on us.

Sometimes we look at difficult circumstances and we are on a trajectory of a spirituality that leads to ever-increasing levels of comfort.

You know I used to resent sitting on wooden pews at the Peoples Church – they are not very comfortable. But I look at that now and I go, wow, as a church, you know what? I kind of like them, a little bit because I don't want you to be comfortable. I don't want to make this place so comfortable that we just enjoy congregating together all the time.

See on Sunday we come together and if you looked at the Peoples Church, if you had a map of Toronto, and you looked at the Peoples Church on Sunday, we're all in one address: 374 Sheppard Avenue East.

But I have studied the demographics; I know where you all live because I have your postal codes. And so created a heat signature map of where our church lives Monday through Saturday. One third of our church is in the two wards attached to this building. Two thirds of us are spread throughout the whole region.

Do you know what that tells me? I am told in the book of Acts that God has determined the exact place that you would live – we are told that in Acts. We are told that He has determined the exact place and time that people would live so that they might reach out for Him.

So the reason I believe God has us incarnated and distributed throughout the city, why He has scattered us throughout the city, is so that you might be His chosen instrument by which He wants to make Himself known in every part of our city.

We are a sent body into the dark places, not the well-lit places, but we are gloriously not alone when we go there. We carry into this space the witness of Christ. We carry into the darkness the glorious light of the world who sets the captives free and heals those who are paralyzed by sin. And this is our glorious mission and He invites us into it.

Another interesting thing that emerges not just from this text but throughout the book of Acts is how strategic cities are to the spread of the Gospel through a whole region.

When you read throughout the book of Acts, you see that the Gospel is for people and therefore the highest concentration of people is where oftentimes the Apostle Paul or other servants of Jesus are led to, just as Philip is in this passage.

Cities are strategic regions by which a whole area hears the message of the Gospel. And if you look over our world today, it is estimated that over 55% of the world population lives in urban centers. In Canada it is 85%. 85% of our population lives in cities. Cities are strategic because that is where the people are.

And it leaves me with a question – as I look at Philip sent into this situation, makes me ask are we burdened to reach our city? Do we pray for our city? Do we pray for our neighbors? Do we pray for our friends and our family and our co-workers that reside within our neighborhood? Do you pray for your neighborhood?

Again, I spent the last year reading different writings of Oswald Smith, immensely challenged, but enjoying the missionary heart that beat within him.

And I stumbled across this quote that was in my office for a number of months and he says this: *“I have felt the burden of a city. Its great sorrow has pressed in on my soul. Its vice and sin have bowed me upon my knees in tears.”*

Isn't that a beautiful quote? Church, that is a quote that can only come by spending time alone with the Father and receiving His heart for the people that surround us every day. And it challenged me to think back to the last time that I went to a part of our city and just prayed for a part of that city, the last time where I was burdened in my soul for the millions of people that walk by when you are there praying for their salvation.

Has the sin and vice of Toronto bowed me upon my knees in tears? Am I heartbroken and burdened for the lost in my city?

You know when I first got saved I was so excited that Jesus could save someone as messed up as me and I wanted everyone to know and I would go everywhere and I would tell anyone who would listen. I remember weeping tears for parts of our city or for people that I knew or saw.

And the danger for us as we continue in our Christianity, when we have heard thousands of sermons, where we have witnessed to no avail with the people in our path, we get to this place where we stop feeling the burden. And maybe our eyes dry up and we are no longer weeping for the people that we see every day.

And as I read that quote it made me ask, “Have I felt the burden of our city? Have I felt its sorrow press in on my soul? Has its sin and vice bowed me upon my knees in tears?”

That is my prayer for us as a church. We are founded on the premise that we want everyone to experience the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ because we believe that it sets the captives free. We believe that as we proclaim Jesus, He Himself sets people free. But it begins with that burden.

The persecution in Jerusalem that was meant to snuff out the church, that was meant to destroy the church, pushes Philip into Samaria and a whole city is impacted.

What was designed to try and stop the church actually created a movement of multiplication throughout the book of Acts. The rapid growth of the church often takes place during times of intense persecution and in the places that we don't think it would likely spread.

We're seeing that right now in our day and age in the Middle East. Who would have guessed that as ISIS created their military campaign leading to a refugee crisis that is enwrapped the whole globe, that more people from a Muslim background would come to faith in Christ in the last five years than the last thousand?

See, oftentimes in times of persecution, Christ meets people and sets them free from what held them. And man's persecution leads to a city's liberation.

What is the effect of the Gospel in this city, in Samaria? We are told in Verse 8. As Philip proclaims the greatness of who Christ is, as Jesus Himself sets the captives free, we are told in Verse 8 there was great joy in that city.

Again, my prayer for our city is that there would be a Gospel joy that sweeps through our city and sets the captives free and that it would spread through our nation, through our world.

But how is God going to do that? Who is God going to use to do that?

One of the things I find encouraging in Acts Chapter 8, and we will close with these few thoughts, is this: who is God impacting the city of Samaria through? This is the first moment of the Gospel going beyond Jerusalem into regions that maybe even the apostles didn't understand who the Gospel was for.

And we are told in Acts Chapter 6 that when the church had grown to such a size in Jerusalem there was an argument about the daily distribution of food to widows and the apostles gathered together and turned this responsibility over to seven men.

Philip was one of the seven men. Stephen, who had been martyred, also was one of the seven.

These are second generation leaders that have been appointed by the apostles and appointed by the church to wait on tables. These are table waiters. God decides to raise up a table waiter to be His chosen instrument by which a whole city is transformed. That is His chosen instrument.

Do you know what that tells me? Sometimes we think that God will only move when we have it all together. Sometimes we have this theology as though God can't use us until we have our Masters of Theology, until we have our argument all locked down, until we have all knowledge; until we have it all together, God can't use us.

God sees fit in Acts Chapter 8 to raise up a second generation leader who is commissioned by the church to wait on tables to be His chosen instrument through which a whole region starts to be infiltrated with the Gospel.

Does God need your abilities? No. What He needs is, as Dave mentioned last week, that we abide in Christ, that we are filled and led by the Holy Spirit but that we are obedient to the Spirit's leading.

What He needed from Philip was his willingness to obey the Spirit leading Him into a region where he may not formally have gone because Jews don't associate with Samaritans.

Now don't get me wrong. I agree when Paul writes to Timothy, "Do your best to present yourself as one approved, a workman who correctly handles the Word of Truth."

I agree when Paul writes that. We should study the Bible, we should be in the Word; we should know what we are talking about.

But let us not think that those are the things that enable us to be used by God. All it requires is our willing obedience to follow the Spirit into places we may not think would be ripe for the Gospel, and for us to open the mouth and say, "Jesus is the answer to everything. Jesus wants to liberate you. Jesus came and died on the cross to set you free from this sin sickness that has gripped all of humanity and certainly, if you are honest with yourself, has gripped you. He is here to set you free from sin if you would but place your faith in Him."

And as we proclaim the message of who He is and this glorious Gospel, it is His job to do the supernatural work of penetrating to the hearts and minds of those who are held captive and setting them free.

And so Philip reminds us and Acts Chapter 8 reminds us that God moves through people who are willing, obedient and faithful. But He doesn't need our refined abilities.

And for all intents and purposes, Philip is an everyday common person who is being used by God in a tremendous way because he is willing to follow the Spirit's leading.

Acts Chapter 8 marks a key shift in God's activity amongst humanity because we now see through the rest of the book of Acts the Gospel is going viral.

Let me explain what I mean by that.

To go viral means an image, video or link that spreads rapidly through a population by being frequently shared with a number of individuals.

When a video goes viral, it works like this: I go on to Facebook, I see the stupid cat video, I think it's funny, I think my network of friends (all five of them) would also think it's funny, so when I see the video, I click "share" and they get to see the video.

And then they see the cat video and because it's so funny, they click "share" and it starts to go and on and on and on and on. And within a 48 hour period, 250 million people have watched this stupid cat video.

Now what did I do? All I did was share it with my small network, right? But they in turn shared it with their network, who shared it with their network, who shared it with their network. And because we are interconnected through the Web, massive hoards of the population saw it.

But all it required was for me to share it with my network.

When you study the book of Acts, the Gospel begins to go viral. It is this uncontrollable. The enemy must be frustrated; if he thought he could snuff it out in the city of Jerusalem; when this great persecution breaks out, all it does is start to spread rapidly through the population – not because someone preaches to the whole known world, but because someone shares it with their network, who shares it with their network, who shares it with their network.

And all of a sudden, by the end of the book of Acts, this Gospel that had filled Jerusalem had spread throughout Judea and Samaria, to the whole ends of the known earth at the time.

The Gospel went viral because of the persecution breaking out in Jerusalem. And we have seen that over church history. We have seen it recently.

A number of years ago when China closed its borders and a bunch of missionary societies were sent out of it, there was fear that this fledgling church within China would die out without support from the outside world.

And when China re-opened its borders, people rushed in to see, had the church diminished during the time that foreign missionaries weren't allowed in there?

And the church had exploded. The church had grown to multiply times of millions of believers. And how did that church explosion grow?

It was through unschooled, uneducated, ordinary men who spent time with Jesus, who dove deep into the Word, saw the Great Commission and were led to proclaim Jesus to the villages throughout China. And the church just blew up in China.

The growth went viral and it wasn't because of our seminaries, it wasn't because of our church growth techniques. If anything, we walked into China afterwards and said, "Well, let us tell you how to do church. You have got to build a big church." And if anything, you went in and mucked it all up.

God doesn't need our well-crafted plans and strategies. What He needs is uneducated, unschooled, ordinary folk who will spend time with Him and walk in obedience to His Spirit. And there will be a movement of His Gospel setting people free.

We saw it in China. The government was trying to snuff out Christianity and it only exploded.

And throughout the book of Acts you realize that God is the One moving, growing the church, directing its advancement through His Holy Spirit. And it's viral. It is a movement of multiplication. It is a decentralized movement throughout the culture of the New Testament.

And nowhere in the Gospels do you see Jesus explaining this to His apostles. There was no manual that was given to them to explain how the church would be established or expand.

But there was an instruction to abide in who He is. See, Philip isn't doing this for Christ; Philip is doing this in Christ, through humble, willing obedience and dependence upon Christ.

Christ is the One setting that Samaritan city free. Philip just happens to be the one who is in tune with what Christ is doing.

And Philip, later in the book of Acts is referred to as Philip the Evangelist – not Philip the table waiter. I don't know that Philip knew that he was an evangelist prior to entering into that Samaritan city and proclaiming who Jesus was.

Do you think Jesus said to him, "Philip, I have given you the gift of evangelism; now just open your mouth and watch – it will work."

Or did Philip step into that city, was so burdened by the darkness he saw that he just had to say something? Say it and then once people started to convert, he realized, "I have been given the gift of evangelism."

He is later referred to Philip the Evangelist, not Philip the table waiter, but I don't know that he knew he had that gift until he took that step of obedience.

I look at a church our size and I wonder how many gifts are lying dormant because we are waiting for that perfect moment to discover if we even have a gift.

In Acts Chapter 1 through 7 you see God is filling Jerusalem with the Gospel. When you look at Acts Chapters 8 through 12, this Gospel starts to permeate Judea and Samaria.

And then in Acts 13 through 28 we see God spreading His Word and His Gospel through the whole known world. And do you know what the pattern is in the book of Acts? Cities are strategic regions, and normal folk, ordinary folk, are planting churches and sharing the Gospel of who Jesus is.

I will close with the two statements written by our founder as a clarion call and reminder to us as to what it means to be a part of the Peoples Church.

Oswald Smith said these things: *"I have felt the burden of a city. Its great sorrow has pressed in on my soul, its vice and sin have bowed me upon my knees in tears."*

Oh how I pray that's our week.

This then is to be our vision: we are to work in places still untouched, unoccupied areas where Christ has not been named, the regions beyond farther, still farther into the night, the neglected fields. These are our watchwords; this our glorious mission.”

Let's pray.

Father, when we look at Acts Chapter 8, we see that you build Your church. And Lord, as we look at our city, its sin and its vice, may it bow us on our knees in prayer.

And Lord, give us eyes to see that person this week who seems so distant from the Gospel, maybe even oppositional to it. Grant us the power and courage of Your Holy Spirit – Your power – to proclaim the greatness of who Christ is because we believe that You want to set the captives free in our city. Grant us the willing obedience to follow You wherever You would lead us as a church.

I lift up our teams right now who are in Haiti and in India. May they experience the comfort and courage of Your Holy Spirit to testify, to display Your love for a hurting broken world. And may we do it in our workplaces, in our homes...