

Ministry of Grace Church

The Acts of The Apostles Chapter 8

Preface:

Last week we talked about Stephen's long speech before the Sanhedrin. He successfully defended himself on the two charges, speaking against the Temple and speaking against Moses and the Law. He also clearly presented a case against the religious leaders of the Jews showing that they had rejected their Messiah, the one who had been sent to rescue them. This was the last rejection by the religious Jews. The Good News would now be presented to the Samaritans and then to the Gentiles.

Because Stephen's accusation was so well crafted and presented in such a clear and direct manner, the members of the Sanhedrin were filled with rage. As a result, they seized Stephen, dragging him outside the city, and stoned him. As they were going out, they laid their outer garments at the feet of Saul of Tarsus, a devout Pharisee and an up-and-coming member of the Sanhedrin.

Saul Ravages the Church

Acts 8:1-3

¹And Saul approved of his execution. 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. ²Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. ³But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

Notes:

Some translations start off this verse with, "And Saul was consenting ...". However, the Greek text indicates more than mere consent. The word here translated "approved" ("consenting" in some translations) is *suneudokeō*. This is made up of *syn*, meaning "together with," *eu*, meaning "well" or "good," and *dokeō*, meaning "to think." Therefore, we can see that *suneudokeō* literally means "to have good thoughts together with someone else." In other words, Saul wasn't just consenting to Stephen's death; along with most of the rest of the Sanhedrin, he was delighted with the stoning of Stephen. (Slide 2)

The immediate result of Stephen's speech and his subsequent stoning, was an intense persecution against the new-born church in Jerusalem. And – the result of this persecution was a scattering of the church. (Slide 3) There are two different Greek words that mean "to scatter." One means "to scatter with the intent of getting rid of," as in, scattering ashes. The other means "to scatter with the intent of putting to use," as in, scattering seed. The word used in verse one is the latter. In other words, the persecution of the early church was God's way of scattering the seeds of faith.

Why didn't Christians in Jerusalem just hunker-down and pray? Surely, God would protect His infant church. To understand why, let's look at a few things surrounding this event. First of all, remember that the day of Pentecost had just recently passed. This is why there had been so many people in Jerusalem.

Every Jewish man was required to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Pentecost. Many of those making the pilgrimage were Hellenistic Jews.

According to Jewish tradition, when the Messiah comes, all Jews will be resurrected. Tradition also holds that those who are buried in Israel, especially those buried in Jerusalem, will be the first ones to enter the Kingdom. Since tradition holds that the Messiah will come down on the Mount of Olives, it became the prime burial location for faithful Jews. (Slide 4)



As a result, there were many Hellenistic Jews who had purchased land in Israel for their own burial. Those who had purchased these burial plots in Jerusalem would likely have been among the first to sell their land to help others in the church who had made the “pilgrimage” during the Pentecost celebration.

Now that the persecution had begun, the Hellenistic Jews who had sold their land had nothing holding them in Jerusalem. Returning to their homeland made perfect sense. The real question is, “Why did the Apostles stick around?” Somebody needed to stay and take care of the fledgling church. (Slide 5) But, keep in mind that the apostles were Hebrew Jews. Their homeland was Israel (in Galilee) and they would be less likely to flee, since they had no specific place to flee to. It would also be unlikely for other Hebrew Jews in the church to flee the country. If anything, they would be more likely to move to other parts of Judea.

Meanwhile, the young Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, Saul of Tarsus proceeded to “ravage” the church, vigorously pursuing members, even going house-to-house to apprehend them. The word translated “ravage” is the word used of a wild predatory animal savagely devouring its prey. In his own words, Saul (the Apostle Paul) described how he acted,

I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blasphemous, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities. (Acts 26:9-11)

He even had them confined in the common prison, men and women. Keep in mind that women weren’t often confined in prison and they did not have separate prisons for men and women. So, although there is no evidence that these Christian women were abused, there was every *logical* reason for them to fear what might happen to them, and every *spiritual* reason to believe they would be protected.

Philip Evangelizes Samaria

Acts 8:4-8

⁴Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. ⁵Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. ⁶And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. ⁷For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸So there was much joy in that city.

Notes:

Of the seven men chosen to serve at the “tables” in the new church, two of them stand out. They are the first two mentioned in **Acts 6:5**, Stephen and Philip. In the previous chapter we learned of Stephen’s boldness when he was brought before the Sanhedrin, but what about Philip? It appears that Stephen had been given the gift of prophecy by the Holy Spirit as evidenced by his ability to boldly proclaim God’s message without reservation, even in the face of a hostile audience. Philip, on the other hand, had obviously been given the gift of Evangelism. Notice also that both of these blessed men had been given the gift of healing and performing miracles. And – because they had been selected to serve at the tables as a way of helping the apostles, they both apparently had the gift of helps. (Slide 6)

I wonder if Philip was with the apostles when Jesus ascended into heaven. Is that why he headed to Samaria? Here’s what we were told about Jesus’ ascension.

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. 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.” And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. (Acts 1:6-9)

Obviously, Philip felt compelled to go to Samaria. However, in order to fully understand Philip’s courage in going to the Samaritans, we need a little history lesson.

Between 740 BC and 720 BC, the Assyrians conquered the 10 northern tribes (Israel) and carried off all the wealthy and middle-class Jews, resettling them in far-off regions of Assyria. Then, they brought in pagan peoples from other parts of the Assyrian Empire who intermarried with the remainder of the northern ten tribes. From these people came the Samaritans.

Generally speaking, First Century Jews despised the Samaritans. They considered them compromising half-breeds who corrupted the worship of the true God. There was deep-seated prejudice, amounting almost to hatred, between the Jews and the Samaritans. (Slide 7) James and John once thought that the Samaritans were only good for being burned by God’s judgment (Luke 9:51-56). The Samaritans even had their own temple and priesthood and openly opposed interacting with the Jews for any purpose.

In spite of the overwhelming reasons not to, verse five tells us, “Philip went down to the city of Samaria ...” (Slide 8)



This sounds strange to us because we are a “map” culture and we see Samaria as being “above” (north of) Judah and Jerusalem. However, the culture of the first century was one of experience. In order to go from Jerusalem to Samaria, people went north of course, but they went on foot. They went downhill, because Jerusalem was *up* in the mountains of Israel. Therefore, Philip went “down” to Samaria.

Philip’s ability to heal, and cast out demons was what attracted the people. But it was his preaching about Jesus Christ that caused many of them to be saved.

Simon the Magician

Acts 8:9-13

⁹But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. ¹⁰They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is the power of God that is called Great.” ¹¹And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. ¹²But when they 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. ¹³Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

Notes:

Here we have a man named Simon the magician, or Simon Magus as he is referred to by some. The verb in verse nine that is translated “practiced magic” is *mageuō*. The root of this word is *magos*, which is what the “wise men” from the East were called at the time of Jesus’ birth. As it is used here, it refers to someone

who practiced sorcery and the “magic arts.” One of the earliest Christian apologists, Justin Martyr said the following in a letter to the Roman government.

After Christ’s ascension into heaven, the devils put forward certain people who said that they themselves were gods; and they were not only not persecuted by you [The Roman government.] but even deemed worthy of honors. There was a Samaritan, Simon, a native of the village called Gitto, who in the reign of Claudius Caesar, and in your royal city of Rome, did mighty acts of magic, by virtue of the art of the devils operating in him. He was considered a god, and as a god he was honored by you with a statue, which statue was erected on the river Tiber, between the two bridges, and bore this inscription, in the language of Rome, “Simoni Deo Sancto,” “To Simon the holy god.” And almost all the Samaritans, and a few even of other nations, worship him and acknowledge him as the first god.

Given what we read in Scripture and what Justin Martyr said, there is no reason to doubt that Simon did some amazing, even miraculous things. However, he did so by the power of the Devil, just as the False Prophet will do in the end times under the direction of the Beast (that is, the antichrist). So, let us not be fooled into thinking that Simon the magician simply did some illusions and sleight-of-hand stunts. He performed demonically empowered magic. (Slide 9) And, taking personal credit for it, he proclaimed himself to be “somebody great.” The Samaritans gave honor to Simon because of the amazing things he performed.

However, Philip was doing even greater feats through the power of the Holy Spirit, casting out demons and even healing people who were paralyzed or lame. Not only was Philip performing greater feats than Simon, notice who was getting the credit in each case. Simon claimed that it was by his own power that he was doing such things (even though he was actually demonically empowered). However, Philip was preaching the kingdom of God and announced the Good News in the name of Jesus Christ. Philip’s message and the source of his power were so much greater than Simon’s, that Simon himself was amazed. He believed Philip’s message, and he was baptized.

The text says that Simon *believed* Philip’s message! At this point we have to ask ourselves, was Simon really saved, converted, born again? Here are several things to consider:

- (1) The verb “believe” (*pisteuō*) does not always refer to saving faith. Simon’s faith could have been like that of the demons in [James 2:19](#), merely intellectual acceptance. Or, he could have been like the people who “believed” in Jesus because of His signs:
Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. ([John 2:23](#))
- (2) What was the basis of Simon’s faith? Was it on the Word of God or the miracles that Philip performed? Was he any different than the people who observed Jesus’ miracles and then proclaimed, “Crucify Him!”
- (3) There is no indication that Simon repented of his sin. A survey of the word “repentance” in the New Testament will confirm that repentance is necessary for salvation.
- (4) Luke never stated that Simon received the Holy Spirit ([Acts 8:17-18](#)).
- (5) The verb “repent” (*metanoēō*) used in [Acts 8:22](#) is normally addressed to lost people. Peter commanded Simon to “repent.”
- (6) The word “perish” (*eis apōleian*) employed in [Acts 8:20](#) is strong. It is related to the word “perish” in [John 3:16](#).

(7) The description of Simon in **Acts 8:23** is a better description of a lost man than of one who is saved.

We cannot be dogmatic about whether or not Simon was genuinely saved. He may have thought so, but in my opinion, the evidence suggests otherwise.

The Samaritans Receive the Spirit

Acts 8:14-17

¹⁴Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, ¹⁵who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.

Notes:

When the Samaritans believed in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, they did not immediately receive the Holy Spirit. It was not until a delegation from the Apostles in Jerusalem came and prayed for them and then laid their hands on them, that they finally received the Holy Spirit. Why was this necessary? Did they have to wait for the “second blessing of the Spirit” as some churches teach today. If that were the case, why don’t we read in the Epistles about the necessity of praying for the second blessing of the Holy Spirit after salvation?

First of all, remember that the book of Acts is a transitional book. The Christian faith is different than the Jewish faith. Yes, both believe in the same Creator God, but in the Jewish faith no one is ever indwelt by the Holy Spirit. (Slide 10) However, the Spirit’s indwelling presence is a hallmark of the Christian belief system. Remember – Transition! Initially, the Jewish believers didn’t receive the Spirit when they first believed either. They had to wait for it. The Holy Spirit was poured out on the Jewish believers at Pentecost. It was a miraculous work that signified a transition from a national faith to a personal faith. The Samaritans, likewise, didn’t immediately receive the Holy Spirit. Instead, it was miraculously bestowed on them by the Jewish Apostles signifying a transition from a Jewish religion to a world-wide religion. Notice that I said, “Jewish Apostles.” Why was it necessary for the Samaritans to receive the Spirit through these Jewish Apostles?

Remember that the Jews hated the Samaritans, considering them as half-breeds, an inferior race of people. Now, this passing-on of the blessing of the indwelling Spirit would be a strong testimony to the Jewish Christians that God had accepted the Samaritans on the same level as the Jews. Also, having this blessing come to the Samaritans at the hands of the Jews would be an indication to the Samaritans that there was to be no schism in the church based on national origin. It was a sign that the Jews were welcoming the Samaritans into the church with open arms.

One more thing before we leave this passage. Notice who the Jerusalem apostles sent to the Samaritans. Peter and John. Why is that significant? First of all, if Peter was the first Pope, as the Catholics and others claim, then he would have been the one sending, not the one being sent. And, what was Jesus’ nickname for James and John? The sons of thunder. Why? In the ninth chapter of Luke’s gospel account, we are told that the Samaritans would not receive Jesus. When James and John heard that they said, “**Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?**” John had a great hatred for the Samaritans. So, it is significant that he was one of the Jewish Christians who were chosen to welcome the Samaritans with open arms.

Simon Tries to Buy the Spirit

Acts 8:18-25

¹⁸Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." ²⁰But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! ²¹You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. ²²Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." ²⁴And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me." ²⁵Now when they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.

Notes:

This is another indication that Simon was not really saved. He was still more interested in himself than he was in God. He wanted the gift so he could receive the attention he used to get. When he asked to purchase this gift, Peter significantly rebuked him. He said,

... 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.

If Simon had been saved, he would not have had to ask God for forgiveness. If you are a Christian, you don't have to ask God for forgiveness when you sin! Instead, we are commanded to confess our sins. That does not mean to ask for forgiveness. It means to agree with God that what we did is sin. Simon's answer was to ask Peter to pray for him. If Simon was truly a born-again Christian, he could have prayed himself, with a prayer of confession.

Finally, notice this. The whole Samaritan trip was so impactful on John and Peter that their entire attitude toward the Samaritans changed. See what they did on the way back to Jerusalem?

they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.

Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

Acts 8:26-40

²⁶Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. (Slide 11) ²⁷And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." ³⁰So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³²Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. ³³In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." ³⁴And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵Then Philip opened his mouth, and

beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” ³⁸And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.



Notes:

Now that Philip had accomplished the task to which God had called him in Samaria, the Lord sent him on a new mission. He sent Philip to Gaza, a town on the Mediterranean coast Southwest of Jerusalem. On the way, he met up with an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace.

Now, first of all, the Ethiopia referred to here is not the same as modern-day Ethiopia. It is a reference to ancient Nubia, which was directly south of Egypt. Next, Candace was not the *name* of the queen of Ethiopia, it was her *title* as Queen Mother. (Slide 12) In Nubia, the royal son was worshipped as a god and was exempt from duties of state. That was left up to his mother.

The eunuch that Philip met had a position of great power and responsibility. It is unlikely, therefore, that he was travelling alone or as a single chariot. It is more likely that he was travelling in a caravan. While travelling, he was reading the book of Isaiah. (Slide 13) It was very common then to read the Scriptures out loud so that others could participate in the learning experience.

Philip, upon hearing that he was reading Isaiah, asked him if he understood what he read. He had been reading Isaiah chapter 53, an obvious Messianic passage. So, Philip began with that particular scripture and told the eunuch about the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. The Ethiopian believed the message about Jesus Christ and was born again! So real was his experience that he insisted on stopping the caravan and being baptized immediately! (Slide 14) He was no “closet Christian.” He wanted everybody to know what the Lord had done for him.

As they were coming out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord whisked Philip away. He found himself in the town of Azotus, (Slide 15) which would be the current city of Ashdod, on the Gaza Strip.



He continued to evangelize, moving up the coast until he came to Caesarea, where he finally made his home. It was here, in Caesarea, that Philip and the Apostle Paul would eventually meet. We read about this in Acts chapter 21. In that passage we will also learn about Philip’s daughters.

On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied. (Acts 21:8-9)

So What?

When we look at both Stephen and Philip, we can clearly see what their spiritual gifts were. A number of months ago here at Ministry of Grace Church, we all took a survey to discover what our spiritual gifts are. We also talked about how to put a smile on God’s face. He smiles every time we do acts of righteousness. One of the ways of doing this is by using our spiritual gifts. Sometimes our spiritual gifts can overflow into our secular lives; someone with the spiritual gift of teaching becoming a school teacher, for instance. Using our spiritual gifts in our secular lives can put a smile of God’s face, if that’s what he has called us to.

However – if we’re only using our spiritual gifts in our secular lives, then how is that any different from an unsaved person using their own talents and abilities in their interactions with others. In 1 Corinthians chapter 12, just after Paul tells us about a number of different gifts that are working within the body of Christ, he says:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 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. For the body does not consist of one member but of many ... But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. (1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 18-20)

God has gifted every Christian for one purpose, to build up the body of Christ, the church. Let me say that again. God has gifted every Christian for one purpose, to build up the body of Christ, the church. Stephen

and Philip clearly used their spiritual gifts to build up the body of Christ, the early church in Jerusalem and Samaria. Are you using your spiritual gifts to build up the body of Christ?

I've heard some preachers say that if you aren't using your spiritual gifts in your local church, then you're not using your spiritual gifts. I don't agree with that. Nowhere in the New Testament does it say that spiritual gifts are only to be used in the local church. The body of Christ is worldwide. However, if you're not using your spiritual gifts in your local church, you're missing out on one of the great spiritual blessings. Every local church needs workers who are willing to use their spiritual gifts and we are no exception.

Remember, every Christian will stand before our Lord at the Judgment Seat of Christ where we will be rewarded with crowns for the things done in this body. We will be rewarded for what we have done with the tools that God has given us to use. Using your spiritual gifts in the local church is a crown-worthy deed.

Now What?

The next step is up to you. Seek the Lord in prayer and ask Him to show you where and how He would like you to serve Him.

Let's pray.

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