

A Study in Acts

Lesson 8: Acts 8:1 – 8:40

The book of the Acts has been considered divisible into three parts--the first, containing an account of the doings of the church at Jerusalem after our Savior's ascension; the second, which begins at the eighth chapter, narrating the general history of the church in Judea, after its dispersion from Jerusalem; and the third, from the beginning of the thirteenth chapter to the end of the book, containing the personal history of Paul. This division is convenient for some purposes, though there is no reason to suppose that the author of the book had it, himself, particularly in mind.

After Stephen's Death

Act 8:1-4 KJV

- (1) And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.
- (2) And devout men carried Stephen *to his burial*, and made great lamentation over him.
- (3) As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed *them* to prison.
- (4) Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.

The words “at that time” may also be rendered “on that day”. The murder of Stephen was the beginning of what can basically be described as riots. The results of which were the disciples were scattered throughout the area (the Apostles remained in Jerusalem).

At the same time, a group of Christian men gave Stephen a deserved burial. We are not certain whether or not the Sanhedrin gave them permission to do this. Normally, one who was stoned to death (or burned) for a crime would be buried separate from everyone else, in a location fit for his or her station.

And Saul, clearly a respected member of the Jewish society; one with authority in the eyes of the Jews, began a great persecution of the Church of Christ. All Disciples of Christ, which were captured, were imprisoned. It is important to note that Saul will later say, in Acts 22, that he was working under the authority of the chief priest.

The importance of this passage, is that the disciples were scattered, but went on preaching the word everywhere they went. Thus, the persecution that Saul did, had the opposite effect he was hoping for.

Philip's Story

Philip in Samaria

Act 8:5-8 KJV

- (5) Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them.
- (6) And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did.
- (7) For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed *with them*: and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed.

(8) And there was great joy in that city.

There was an apostle, and also one of the seven deacons, of the name of Philip. It would seem, from Acts 8:14, that this individual was not one of the apostles; it is inferred, therefore, that Philip the deacon is here intended.

With Acts 8:5, a new era of the church begins. The Gospel is no longer preached only in Jerusalem, but also in Samaria.

There is some doubt about what city this actually was. If it was in the region of Samaria, this is significant because there was a great deal of tension between those in Judea and those in Samaria.

A second member of the seven is shown to have the power to do miracles.

Simon the Sorcerer

Act 8:9-13 KJV

- (9) But there was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one:
- (10) To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God.
- (11) And to him they had regard, because that of long time he had bewitched them with sorceries.
- (12) But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.
- (13) Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done.

Clearly, this individual had fooled the people of this city with tricks. They believed him to be powerful based on his illusions. But when Philip was able to convince them of the ways of God, Simon not only turned from his ways, but was baptized.

NOTE: Men and women are baptized, not children.

The Apostles Reinforcement

Act 8:14-17 KJV

- (14) Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John:
- (15) Who, when they were come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost:
- (16) (For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.)
- (17) Then laid they *their* hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost.

The purpose of this apostolic mission to Samaria was evidently to qualify certain men for leadership through the laying on of the apostles' hands and the accompanying endowment of them with miraculous powers.

Significantly, Peter does not appear in this passage as any kind of pope or authority sending others to do his bidding, but as himself "sent" by others.

These individuals had been baptized and received the gift of the Holy Spirit which is salvation. They had received any miraculous gifts that the Apostles and apparently the seven chosen had received. The Apostles came with the specific intent of giving these

powers. Note that Philip was apparently NOT capable of giving these powers. Therefore, this was a plenary, not a self-perpetuating ability. Only the apostles could convey it; and when the last man died upon whom the apostles had laid hands, the age of miracles expired by limitation.

Simon The Sorcerer Slips Up

Act 8:18-24 KJV

- (18) And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money,
- (19) Saying, Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost.
- (20) But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money.
- (21) Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God.
- (22) Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee.
- (23) For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and *in* the bond of iniquity.
- (24) Then answered Simon, and said, Pray ye to the Lord for me, that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me.

The time indicated by this clause was not prior to or concurrent with Simon's conversion, but afterward. The supposition that Simon became a Christian hypocritically with the intent of adding to his own powers such abilities as Philip had demonstrated is refuted by this text. It was at some indefinite, and perhaps even considerable, time after his conversion that Simon was tempted and fell into the sin mentioned here.

In this instance, the apostle Peter, using the keys of the kingdom of God promised him by the Saviour (Matthew 16:19), opened the way for a backslider to return to God. If Simon had not been a backslider from the faith, but had been an alien hypocrite pretending a faith and submitting to a baptism which were worthless, Peter would never have commanded him to repent and pray, these very commandments standing here as an apostolic confirmation of the fact that Simon was in possession of a covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ, despite the fact of his sin. The door here opened for Simon's return is the same that must be entered by all Christians who, when overtaken by some sin, seek to return to the Lord.

Some read this as Simon's failure to pray himself; but this is not necessary. One who sincerely prays for forgiveness naturally desires that others also should join in his supplications. Nothing in the text denies that this is what is indicated here.

The Apostle's Depart

Act 8:25 KJV

- (25) And they, when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, returned to Jerusalem, and preached the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans.

Again, we see that the Apostles testify, that is witness, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I have mentioned many times during this study that this testimony is one of the primary purposes.

Philip and the Ethiopian

Act 8:26-28 KJV

(26) And the angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert.

(27) And he arose and went: and, behold, a man of Ethiopia, an eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who had the charge of all her treasure, and had come to Jerusalem for to worship,

(28) Was returning, and sitting in his chariot read Esaias the prophet.

The angel's message to Philip set the evangelist on the road several hours in anticipation of the eunuch's departure from Jerusalem, being so timed that contact with him would be made. Of course, the eunuch knew nothing of this providence; and, similarly, it may be that many a man's contact with the gospel today is the result of providences unknown to himself.

NOTE: The word "desert" here means unpopulated, not "without water".

Candice was the dynastic name of the queens of Ethiopia, just as Pharaoh was the dynastic name, or title, of the kings of Egypt. The kingdom was that of Meroe. The fact of the eunuch's traveling some fifteen hundred miles to worship indicates that he was a devout worshiper of God.

The focus of the word of God upon this incident is an amazing commentary on what is important and what is not. For example, we cannot say what kind of chariot this was, or what kind of animals drew it, nor what part of the road marked the encounter described here; we cannot tell the color of this Ethiopian's skin, nor his age, nor the circumstance of his having been made a eunuch, and not even the name of the queen whom he served! None of these things was important; but we do know the exact lines from Isaiah's prophecy which challenged his thoughtful examination. These are given in Acts 8:32.

Act 8:29-31 KJV

(29) Then the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot.

(30) And Philip ran thither to *him*, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou reatest?

(31) And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him.

How did the Spirit speak to Philip? It might have been through the angel who had previously appeared to him, or it could have been that one of God's prophets gave him the message. However it was, there is no evidence that this was merely an impression, a feeling, or any other kind of merely subjective thing. Intelligible words were spoken, a definite message communicated to Philip, and received and acted upon by him without delay.

Notice the part played by this Ethiopian officer in the circumstances leading to his salvation:

1. He was a devout and faithful worshiper of God, living up to all the light he had.
2. He made a journey of fifteen hundred miles to worship in the city where God had commanded men to worship.
3. He either took with him on the journey, or procured at Jerusalem, a copy of the prophecy of Isaiah.

4. He was reading aloud from the word of God at the time of his encounter with Philip.
5. He confessed to a stranger that he could not understand what he was reading and that he needed guidance in his study.
6. He invited a preacher of the gospel to sit with him in his chariot.
7. He asked a question concerning a passage of God's word that he could not understand.

Act 8:32-35 KJV

- (32) The place of the scripture which he read was this, He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth:
- (33) In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth.
- (34) And the eunuch answered Philip, and said, I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man?
- (35) Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.

This passage, of course, is Isaiah 53:7f, one of the great Suffering Servant passages of Isaiah. Christ was the "lamb slain from the foundation of the world," "the lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." Jesus meekly submitted to the outrages perpetrated against himself, offering no more resistance than a lamb, either sheared or slaughtered.

The apostolic preachers all laid heavy emphasis upon the Old Testament prophecies concerning Jesus Christ; and no better place for a beginning could be imagined than the famous 53rd chapter of Isaiah, so rich with prefigurations of the life of our Lord. Wherever the sermons of those apostolic preachers began, the message was always the same, namely, that men should believe on the Lord Jesus with all their heart, repent of their transgressions, and be baptized into Christ. That this is exactly what Philip preached here, as he did also to the Samaritans, will be evident in the next verses.

Act 8:36-40 KJV

- (36) And as they went on *their* way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, *here is* water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?
- (37) And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.
- (38) And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.
- (39) And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing.
- (40) But Philip was found at Azotus: and passing through he preached in all the cities, till he came to Caesarea.

The request for baptism on the part of the eunuch was the immediate and direct result of Philip's preaching unto him Jesus; and in this is manifest the fact that preaching Jesus means preaching baptism for the remission of sins.

Under Acts 8:31, it was noted that the eunuch did no less than seven things in the discharge of his duty to be concerned about his own salvation; and here it is clear that he did three additional things. He requested baptism, commanded the chariot to stand still, and submitted to baptism. There are many today who need to command their own chariot to stand still while they submit to the ordinance of God.

No man could frame a sentence in any language that would show any more conclusively than does this one that the baptism here administered was by immersion.

...and then he rejoiced. After baptism, not when he believed.

Azotus was the ancient Philistine city of Ashdod; and Philip preached there and in all the cities of the Mediterranean coast until he came to Caesarea Palestina where he established a residence. We shall meet with Philip again in Acts 21:8.