

Acts Chapter 8

Welcome back to our Monday Night Bible Study. Thank you, as always, for your faithful study of God's Word. Several of you have reached out to me this past week, and Becky and I are so very thankful for your prayers for our family.

Tonight, we will read the continuing narrative from Luke in which he describes the immediate aftermath following the stoning martyrdom of the Spirit-anointed and -empowered Deacon, Stephen. So, let's dive right into Acts Chapter 8 and see what the Lord will teach us this evening.

Pray.

Acts 8:1-3

Saul the Persecutor

8 Saul agreed with putting him to death.

On that day a severe persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the land of Judea and Samaria. ² Devout men buried Stephen and mourned deeply

over him. ³ Saul, however, was ravaging the church. He would enter house after house, drag off men and women, and put them in prison.

It is fascinating to me that the Holy Spirit led Luke to so bluntly assess the state of Saul's mind and actions during the stoning of Stephen. One cannot help but marvel the contrast and comparison of Stephen to Saul, for one saw Christ standing at the right hand of God the Father and prayed a prayer of forgiveness for his tormenters; the other, conversely, agreed with those carrying out Stephen's murder. We know, of course, what ultimately took place in Saul's life, for he personally was later taken into the Third Heaven, and he then offered similar words to that of Stephen, "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Colossians 3:1). Oh, the saving grace of Jesus Christ that would allow a man who persecuted the Church to be used by God to remind us of where Christ is!

Here in Acts 8, though, the story of Saul is much different, and we will get back to it in a moment. First, though, we must see what else happened after the death of Stephen. The Bible says that "devout men" buried Stephen, and that they deeply mourned him. This is extraordinary! These men were apparently unconverted Jews, and they were breaking their own tradition by mourning someone who had been executed, honoring Stephen with a Jewish burial. Some have posited that

these men may have even been part of the Sanhedrin who were unable to convince their fellow Jews to follow Gamaliel's advice. We do not know for sure, but we do know that they treated Stephen's body and memory with great respect.

As we continue this account, we must also wonder if Saul was one of those who questioned Stephen and came away flummoxed at Stephen's Spirit-filled answers. After all, Saul was an incredibly educated Pharisee and a student of Gamaliel himself. Perhaps his frustration led to anger. In any case, it is evident that Saul was leading the charge in the Jewish leaders' persecution of the Church, with Paul personally entering house after house doing the unthinkable – putting both men *and* women in prison. This was a cultural shift far beyond the norm – typically only men were put in prison. Saul apparently spared no one in his zeal against God's Church.

The persecution was obvious as many Christians were dispersed throughout Judea and Samaria – the word *diaspora* is derived here. Scholars love to debate this section, wondering if it was a persecution of the Hellenistic Jews only or if the entirety of the Church was persecuted. A plain reading seems most appropriate to me, and the Apostles may have been briefly spared because the Sanhedrin had learned that persecuting them only led to miraculous delivery and an even more determined sharing of the Gospel. Regardless of why the Apostles were

spared during this time, it should be said the Jewish leaders' persecution of the Church did not work out the way they envisioned.

Acts 8:4-8

Philip in Samaria

⁴ So those who were scattered went on their way preaching the word. ⁵ Philip went down to a^[a] city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. ⁶ The crowds were all paying attention to what Philip said, as they listened and saw the signs he was performing. ⁷ For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed, and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. ⁸ So there was great joy in that city.

I believe Acts 8:4 (David, please leave verse this up as I talk through the points) is among the most overlooked verses in all the Scriptures:

- It is a verse that tells us that the enemy's plan failed: instead of cowering in fear as they were scattered about the land, the believers spread the Gospel of Jesus – quite literally carrying out the Great Commission of Jesus Christ. In the process, we see the fulfillment of several later verses in Scripture:
 - Romans 8:28 says, “We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

- Philippians 4:13 says, “I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me.”
- 1 Thessalonians 1:3 says, “We recall, in the presence of our God and Father, your work produced by faith, your labor motivated by love, and your endurance inspired by the hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”
- It is a verse that tells us that God is sovereign. This move of these evil men was planned to stop the spread of the Gospel. That didn’t work!
 - As when Joseph’s brothers intended him harm, God had his own plan: “You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present result – the survival of many people” (Genesis 50:20).
 - It also reminds me of the story of Elisabeth Elliot, whose husband, Jim, was martyred in 1956 alongside four other missionaries to a tribe in Ecuador. Instead of giving up on the tribe who murdered her husband, Elisabeth Elliot and Rachel Saint, whose husband Nate was also killed by the same tribe, learned the tribe’s language and then led them to Jesus Christ. Elisabeth, her three-year-old daughter, Valerie, and her friend Rachel *lived* with this tribe for numerous years.
- It is a verse that reminds us that God’s Word will not go out void (or empty): “So my word that comes from my mouth will not

return to me empty but it will accomplish what I please and will prosper in what I send it to do” (Isaiah 55:11). Indeed, it does – many people would go so far as to say that Christianity would ultimately lead to the demise of the Roman Empire, a supposition I fully embrace in that the adoption of Christianity by Roman leaders, most importantly, Augustine, ultimately was at least one significant reason that the Empire declined over time.

Here in Acts 8, long before Augustine, Luke tells us that Philip went down to Samaria during the Diaspora. There, a tremendous outpouring of God’s grace was experienced by the people, accompanied by healing and demonic deliverance through the Spirit-filled Philip. The Bible says there was great joy in Samaria as the people there encountered their Messiah, Jesus Christ. Again, this reminds me of Elisabeth Elliot who wrote a book about Spiritual disciplines for believers, *Joyful Surrender*. Regardless of our circumstances, God can do amazing things in and through our lives for His own honor and glory, and we can experience joy in the process.

Now, let’s look at the results of Philip’s obedience:

Acts 8:9-13

The Response of Simon

⁹ A man named Simon had previously practiced sorcery in that city and amazed the Samaritan people, while claiming to be somebody great.¹⁰ They all paid attention to him, from the least of them to the greatest, and they said, “This man is called the Great Power of God.”^[b] ¹¹ They were attentive to him because he had amazed them with his sorceries for a long time. ¹² But when they believed Philip, as he proclaimed the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. ¹³ Even Simon himself believed. And after he was baptized, he followed Philip everywhere and was amazed as he observed the signs and great miracles that were being performed.

This is one of the most interesting accounts in the entire Book of Acts. There was a man named Simon who apparently had lied to people and convinced them of many evil perspectives (these Samaritans’ hearts were apparently very superstitious). It should also be noted that the enemy is able to deceive people quite well and quite often as he did through Simon. Remember, too, that demonic acts are apparently possible, as we recall when the Egyptian magicians attempted to out-duel Moses and Aaron during the time of the plagues brought upon Egypt, before the Israelites’ eventual exodus from their slaveholders. Here, though, we see that many men and women were converted to Christ and personally accepted the Good News of the Gospel. They

turned away from the attention-seeking Simon and his false magic and turned to the life-giving message from Philip.

Simon was so impressed that he also apparently accepted Philip's message, going so far as to follow Philip everywhere. Simon was quite enamored with the miraculous signs and miracles accomplished through the power of the Spirit and in the name of Jesus, as we know from earlier testimony about the gifts accomplished through Jesus's Name.

Acts 8:14-25

Simon's Sin

¹⁴ When the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. ¹⁵ After they went down there, they prayed for them so that the Samaritans might receive the Holy Spirit because he had not yet come down on any of them. ¹⁶ (They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) ¹⁷ Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸ When Simon saw that the Spirit^[e] was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹ saying, "Give me this power also so that anyone I lay hands on may receive the Holy Spirit."

²⁰ But Peter told him, “May your silver be destroyed with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! ²¹ You have no part or share in this matter, because your heart is not right before God.²² Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, your heart’s intent may be forgiven. ²³ For I see you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by wickedness.”

²⁴ “Pray to the Lord for me,” Simon replied, “so that nothing you have said may happen to me.”

²⁵ So, after they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they traveled back to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans.

Now we get to a couple of theological conundrums, the first beginning with the arrival of Peter and John who had been sent by the Jerusalem-based Apostles of Jesus Christ. When they got to Samaria, Peter and John prayed that the Samaritans would receive the Holy Spirit. Now, *this* is interesting! Do we not teach that the Spirit indwells a person upon regeneration (that is, at salvation)? Well, yes. And we do believe this. However, at least in this event, the Holy Spirit did not *baptize* the Samaritan believers until Peter and John arrived and prayed for them.

- It seems obvious that these people were already genuinely saved. It is unlikely the Spirit would have permitted Philip to baptize people

who were not genuinely converted (Philip obviously knew the Spirit's voice).

- Some scholars believe that the Holy Spirit was awaiting the Apostles arrival for the purpose of reminding the Apostles that the Samaritans could receive Jesus too. Given that the Apostles were present when Jesus spoke to woman at the well and that they had seen Samaritans accept Jesus before, this does not seem like a good argument to me.
- Other theologians surmise that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a second event in the Christian's life. Some Pentecostal denominations believe the initial physical evidence of this Spirit baptism is that the people speak in tongues. In this case, it is clearly a second event – the real question is whether this is a *normative* event or if people are filled with the Spirit at salvation.
- I will leave it to you to decide which version you believe to be true – ask the Holy Spirit to open His Word in your hearts.

The second theological issue in this passage is that of Simon. He obviously still has a great love for both attention and for the gifts of the Spirit and attempts to *buy* these gifts. Now, I know a lot of people who *ignore* their Spiritual gifts, but I cannot say I have ever known anyone who wanted to *buy* them!

Again, there are arguments among scholars about the meaning of all of this, leading some to the conclusion that Simon was not really saved at first because Peter said that Simon had “no part or share in this matter.” Whether or not Peter’s response was a salvational statement or, instead, a statement that the Spirit had not fallen on Simon is a matter of interpretation. That said, there is no doubt that Peter felt Simon’s intentions were not pure and that his request was obviously not of God.

Motives of the heart matter! Proverbs 16:2 says, “All a person’s ways seem right to him, but the LORD weighs motives.” In Simon’s case, we can also remember Paul’s words to the Corinthians, “So don’t judge anything prematurely before the Lord comes, who will both bring to light what is hidden in darkness and reveal the intentions of the hearts. And then praise will come to each one from God” (1 Corinthians 4:5).

Pastors do not get special treatment either – Paul later warns the Philippians Church that some pastors preach out of “selfish ambition” (see Philippians 1:17). Again, our motives should be from a true heart of worship (Romans 12:1): “Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God: this is your true worship.”

Other than Simon’s request for prayer, we do not know from these verses his end result. But if the prayer of his heart was sincere when he asked Peter to pray for him, we know that God is faithful to answer

prayer! Jesus personally said, “Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matthew 7:7-8).

We *also know for sure* from this passage that people in Samaria, men and women, were being saved, and that, afterwards, the Apostles returned to Jerusalem, preaching the Gospel on the way.

And this brings us to one of my – you guessed it – favorite passages. It is a passage for the individual and it is a passage for the Church.

Acts 8:26-40

The Conversion of the Ethiopian Official

²⁶ An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip: “Get up and go south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is the desert road.^[d]) ²⁷ So he got up and went. There was an Ethiopian man, a eunuch and high official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to worship in Jerusalem ²⁸ and was sitting in his chariot on his way home, reading the prophet Isaiah aloud.

²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, “Go and join that chariot.”

³⁰ When Philip ran up to it, he heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, “Do you understand what you’re reading?”

³¹ “How can I,” he said, “unless someone guides me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the Scripture passage he was reading was this:

**He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb is silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.**

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who will describe his generation?

For his life is taken from the earth.^[e]

³⁴ The eunuch said to Philip, “I ask you, who is the prophet saying this about—himself or someone else?” ³⁵ Philip proceeded to tell him the good news about Jesus, beginning with that Scripture.

³⁶ As they were traveling down the road, they came to some water. The eunuch said, “Look, there’s water. What would keep me from being baptized?” ^[f] ³⁸ So he ordered the chariot to stop, and both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him any longer but went on his way

rejoicing. ⁴⁰ Philip appeared in^[g] Azotus,^[h] and he was traveling and preaching the gospel in all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

There is *so* much to unfold in this passage! First, we can see here that the individual matters much to God. Regardless of how small we feel, regardless of how confused we may be, regardless of how much authority we do or do not have in our daily lives, there is a God who loves us and who calls us one by one. When we enter the Kingdom of God, we do so one at a time – and only in Christ.

He knows who you are. The Psalmist said, “For it was you who created my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I will praise you because I have been remarkably and wondrously made” (Psalm 139:13-14). He knows you by name: “The gatekeeper opens it for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” (John 10:3). Jesus said, “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). He also said, “...I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance” (John 10:10b). *Jesus* cares about *you*!

When the angel told Philip to get up and go, God was removing him from a large group of recent converts who were in open salvational fervor, Spirit-empowered movement, and life-renewal. The Church was exploding in growth. Samaritans – so long ignored and treated harshly

by the Jews – were coming to Christ in repentance and being transformed and saved and filled in the Holy Spirit. Yet Philip had to leave all of this and go to the *one* person God intended to save in that moment – a eunuch from Ethiopia. We should not be surprised at this turn of events; after all, Jesus personally gave the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Matthew 18:12-12; Luke 15:4-7), illustrating the leaving of the ninety-nine to go after the one.

We also see in this passage an important understanding of the entirety of the Scriptures – that they are *all* about Jesus. As Towns notes, “Christianity begins with the statement, ‘In the beginning God...’” In this case, the Eunuch, who had traveled to Jerusalem to worship God, was reading from Isaiah 53 and was intrigued about the identity of the suffering person in this passage. And *right there* is where Philip began – explaining the Old Testament in a New Testament light – the Light of Jesus. Some have called this passage “the Mount Everest of Messianic Prophecy.” As Horton notes, “...this Spirit-filled, Spirit-led evangelist ‘told him the good news about Jesus. Jesus alone never sinned and never did anything to deserve suffering or death. For those who will see it, no passage in the prophets more clearly pictures the vicarious suffering, death, resurrection, and triumph of Jesus. He alone is the sacrificial Lamb of God. Though His life was taken, He arose, and His spiritual descendants are ‘heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ’” (Romans 8:17).

It seems obvious that the Holy Spirit convicted the Eunuch of his need for Jesus Christ through the Scriptures and Philip's Spirit-anointed teaching – as soon as they came upon an appropriately-sized body of water, the Eunuch desired baptism to signify his conversion to Jesus Christ. This says a lot about the Spirit's pursuit of the Ethiopian, the Eunuch's willingness to submit to Jesus Christ and come to Him for salvation, and about the *method* of baptism that we see in Scripture.

When Philip and the Eunuch came up out of the water, the Holy Spirit miraculously moved Philip to Azotus, a town approximately thirty-five miles from Gaza. He then preached the Gospel from there to Caesarea.

The Eunuch, according to Scripture, went on his way – rejoicing. Eunuchs, because of the nature of their physical impairment, were not allowed to fully participate in Jewish practices. *This* Eunuch, however, represents the truth that *all* people can be saved by Christ. This was also a crossing of a racial barrier – a problem then as it remains in various parts of the world today.

In the late 70's or early 80's, I was a kid in a church which my Dad pastored. There was an event hosted by our church in which kids from various other youth groups were invited. When one Church showed up

with Black kids, a few of the deacons told my Dad he could not host an altar call (known as an “invitation” in Baptist circles of that time) at the end of the service because some of the Black kids might respond and come up to the altar to join the Church. My father’s anger was palpable – and he told the deacons that they were significantly in error, that anyone is welcome to come to Christ, and that they would in no way prohibit anyone from doing so. I have been proud of my Dad many times, and still am in my memories, but this is one of the events in which I am *most* honored to be his son.

In our passage tonight, the Jewish Philip did not hesitate to speak to the Ethiopian Eunuch. He was simply obedient to God regardless of the customs of the times and the culture in which he and the Eunuch both lived. Philip simply obeyed the Holy Spirit and did as he was commanded to do.

So, what happened to the Eunuch? The Bible says that he went away rejoicing at his new salvation in Christ. Church tradition, including the testimony of Irenaeus, tells us that this Eunuch – formerly silenced in Judaism but now free in Christ – evangelized his homeland. In fact, Ethiopia is the second country to officially proclaim Christianity as its state religion, “having done so in A.D. 333.” Archaeological evidence confirms such statements. Almost half of today’s Ethiopians claim

Christianity with 98 percent saying religion is very important in their lives, 78 percent attending church weekly, and 65 percent praying daily.

Well, what are the lessons for you and me in this account? I am glad you asked!

- 1) We must yield – constantly – to the Spirit’s guidance. What if Philip had ignored the Spirit and the angel that was sent to him and instead had said, “But we have a great revival going on here!” Then an entire Country would have conceivably been denied Christ, and modern Ethiopia could have been raised up in a completely different religion. They could have missed Jesus Christ! Instead, because of Philip’s obedience *and* the Eunuch’s acceptance of Christ through his *own* obedience, an entire Country was offered the opportunity to know Jesus.
- 2) We must be prepared – always! – to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. This means *we* must know the Scriptures. Philip was Spirit-filled, yes, but he was also a Deacon – not one of the original Apostles; but instead, a willing, Spirit-filled man of God. Look at his influence! Look how the Spirit used him! Look how *biblically* prepared he was! Look how Great Commission focused he was! Look how much he was willing to share Jesus – one person or one Church or one town at a time! This should be our heart too! Ask questions of people. Listen to them. Proclaim the Gospel! As Jesus

said, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Pray.

Acts 8 Sources

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