

The Historical Stories of the Acts of the Apostles

Lesson 5

Acts 8:1^b – Acts 8:40

According to Luke's account, the first great persecution of the church began on the day of Stephen's stoning. That day, in fear, all the church members began to scatter throughout the countryside, away from the evil intentions of Saul of Tarsus.

The Beginning of the Great Persecution and Scattering of the Church

Acts 8:^{1b} And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ²And *some* devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. ³But Saul *began* ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison. ⁴Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.

It is impossible to accurately date the year of Stephen's death. We know that Pentecost occurred on May 25th, AD 30, but the narrative of Luke's record rapidly skips through the days, months and even years, blurring all ability to establish a credible timeline. At best, we can assume that Stephen's stoning occurred sometime between AD 31 and AD 34.

With the beginning of Saul's persecution, all church members run for their lives from the major cities where Christians live and congregate. The news of Saul's reign of terror spreads like a wild fire driven by the wind across a dry, grassy field. The only Christians who do not fear Saul are the apostles. They faithfully remain in Jerusalem, preaching everyday on the porch outside the temple to Jews who need to come to know the Lord as their Savior.

Saul's persecution of the church does not stop the preaching of the gospel; rather, it causes an explosion of ministry opportunities for church members outside the sphere of influence of the apostles. As the members scatter to the neighboring towns and cities, they take the gospel message with them, sharing it with everyone they meet. The remaining six men chosen to serve the tables also scatter and Luke sees fit to record the ministry of one of them, Philip.

Philip Becomes an Evangelist in Samaria

Acts 8: ⁵And Philip went down to the city of Samaria and *began* proclaiming Christ to them. ⁶And the multitudes with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. ⁷For *in the case of* many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of *them* shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. ⁸And there was much rejoicing in that city.

In a straight line, Samaria is only thirty-five miles north of Jerusalem. During the time of the divided kingdoms, Samaria became the capital of Israel,⁸¹ and Jerusalem

⁸¹ The first capital of the Northern Kingdom was Shechem. It was later moved to Samaria.

remained the capital of the southern kingdom. But after the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722, BC the area was no longer part of the holy land. Assyrians who had conquered the northern kingdom, moved into the land with their practices of idol worship and intermarried with the Jews left behind. The Samaritans were then considered half-breeds and rejected by the full-blooded Jews.⁸²

Nevertheless, the Lord came to earth to give His life as a ransom for the entire world, not just the Jews. The Samaritans are ready for the gospel message and Philip is ready to preach.

Simon the Magician Tries to Acquire the Secret of the Apostle's Power

Acts 8:⁹ Now there was a certain man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city, and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; ¹⁰and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, "This man is what is called the Great Power of God." ¹¹And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. ¹²But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike. ¹³And even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip; and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.

For the first time in its existence, the church faces the problem of a member who is a superstitious and religious imposter. Simon is well-known as a popular sorcerer in Samaria long before Phillip's visit to the city. A master of the ancient black arts, Simon is surely a magician of the priestly order founded by Zoroaster during the Medo-Persian Empire.⁸³ The gullible people of Samaria are in awe over his abilities and believe he has been invested with the "Great Power of God."

With Philip's arrival in Samaria, Simon is dumbfounded by the abilities of this man. As a magician, Simon knows that all his abilities are illusions, tricks and slights of hand, misdirection, or worse, the use of mind-altering drugs or potions. Simon's power is fraudulent; Philip's power is genuine. No doubt, he wants to know the secret to Philip's power to influence hearts and minds of people so he can add it to his bag of tricks. The gospel Philip is sharing with the people is changing their lives in a magnificent way. The great signs and miracles that Simon sees are changes of attitude and ways of thinking as well the outlook about life and faith. Nothing in Simon's bag of tricks can influence people like the gospel. Determined to discover the secret, Simon acts as an imposter to stay close to Philip. He is a victim of his own self-delusion with no need for Jesus as a personal Savior. He is baptized like other believers, an act that provides undeniable and clear proof in this passage that baptism alone does not bring salvation to anyone.

⁸² When Jesus approached the Samaritan woman at the well, offering her living water, He was breaking one of the strictest traditions of the religious leaders of the day. John 4:4-26

⁸³ The Medo-Persian Empire overthrew the Babylonian Empire in 536 BC. It lasted until it was overthrown by the Greek Empire in 330 BC.

Peter and John Go to Samaria and Pray for the Holy Spirit

Acts 8:¹⁴ Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, ¹⁵ who came down and prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶ For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then they *began* laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.

Upon hearing of the effectiveness of the gospel in the city of Samaria, as well as the province by the same name, Peter and John are dispatched to the area. We must remember that even though the Samaritans were half Jewish in their bloodline, their Gentile blood was rejected by the full-blooded Jews. For Christians of Jewish descent to accept the Samaritans, someone with authority will have to give a stamp of approval for their admission into the church. Peter is clearly the leader of the church at this time and John is the second in command. When Peter and John arrive in Samaria, it is not a slap in the face to Philip; it is a confirmation of his work and a hearty approval of the church's acceptance of the Samaritans.

A theological difficulty develops in this passage. It is said in today's theology that when a person accepts the Lord as Savior and becomes a believer, the Holy Spirit is immediately given to him as a Gift from the Lord. But in this passage, the new church members have not received the Holy Spirit upon their profession of belief. Another theological difficulty arises at this point. Today, some teach that the Holy Spirit is given upon baptism, but these members are baptized and still have not received the Holy Spirit. In this passage, the Samaritans do not receive the Holy Spirit until Peter and John arrive and lay their hands on them. What does all this mean?

Previously we have mentioned that the Acts of the Apostles cannot be used to establish a theological doctrine. It is a transitional book that ties the life and ministry of the Lord to the life and ministry of the church. It is a book that introduces the apostles and records for all time the beginning years of their ministries. It also introduces the Lord's replacement for Judas Iscariot as Saul of Tarsus who will record the majority of the Lord's future directions and instructions for the church. With that information as the background, this passage clearly shows the difficulty of using Acts as a foundation for any doctrine.

First, the laying on of hands does not occur on the Day of Pentecost, the first day of the establishment of the church.⁸⁴ Second, the laying on of hands does not occur after Peter and John are released and the Holy Spirit fills them while they are praying.⁸⁵ Third, later in the book, when Peter preaches to the Gentiles and the Holy Spirit falls upon them, no one lays hands on anyone.⁸⁶ Fourth, when Paul speaks to the Corinthian church about the gift of the Holy Spirit, he does not mention the laying on of hands.⁸⁷ Fifth, when the apostles lay hands on the seven men chosen to

⁸⁴ Acts 2:4, 33

⁸⁵ Acts 4:31

⁸⁶ Acts 10:44

⁸⁷ 1 Corinthians 12; 1 Corinthians 14

serve the tables, they are already filled with the Holy Spirit before they are selected.

⁸⁸ Sixth, when the church leaders lay hands on Barnabas and Saul before their first missionary journey, they are already filled with the Holy Spirit before the ceremony.

⁸⁹ Therefore, we cannot conclude a definite and clear doctrine concerning the combination of the laying on of hands and the giving of the Holy Spirit. Our only conclusion from this passage must be that the Holy Spirit does not come upon the Samaritans for the first time until the two leading voices in the church arrive to oversee and give hearty approval to their acceptance of the Gift.

Simon Tries to Buy the Secret to the Apostle's Power

Acts 8:¹⁸ Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹ saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." ²⁰ But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! ²¹ "You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God."⁹⁰ ²² "Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³ "For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity."⁹¹ ²⁴ But Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me." ²⁵ And so, when they had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.

Simon the magician, the imposter, is a firsthand witness to the Samaritan Day of Pentecost. What he sees on this day is far beyond anything he has seen in Philip's ministry. The Holy Spirit descends on the Samaritans with such power and miraculous manifestation that Simon will pay any price to obtain the secret. The offer does not entice Peter in any way and his words to Simon are harsh, but not without the opportunity of repentance. Peter would never have offered Simon a chance for repentance before the Day of Pentecost, but now he understands the Lord's heart and His desire that "no one should perish."⁹² Peter candidly identifies Simon's poisonous offer as a sin. Although he has professed his faith and has been dipped in the baptismal waters, he is an unconverted sinner. Sadly, Luke never tells if Simon ever changes his heart.

Philip is Sent to Gaza by an Angel to the Ethiopian Eunuch

Acts 8:²⁶ But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, "Arise and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza." (~~This is a desert road.~~) ²⁷ And he arose and went; and behold, there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship. ²⁸ And he was

⁸⁸ Acts 6:6

⁸⁹ Acts 13:3

⁹⁰ Psalm 78:37

⁹¹ Isaiah 58:6

⁹² John 10:28

returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah.
²⁹And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." ³⁰And when Philip had run up, he heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

With the arrival of Peter and John in Samaria, the Holy Spirit moves in the heart of Philip, directing him to go to Gaza where he meets an Ethiopian eunuch. The man is an official of the court of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. The English seems straight forward in this passage and we assume that the queen's name is Candace. However, with just a little research we find that every Ethiopian queen went by the name of Candace. It is not a personal name; it is a title given to the queens of Ethiopia.⁹³ The queen has delegated great power to the eunuch and most likely, he is returning from a fact-finding journey to investigate the new religious movement of Christianity.

The Ethiopians are already familiar with Judaism. The Old Testament records the political relationship between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (Ethiopia).⁹⁴ She sought the wise counsel of Solomon and also investigated his faith. Through the centuries, many Ethiopians joined the Jewish faith although they were not allowed to be fully Jewish but only proselytes at the gate like all other Gentiles.⁹⁵ The eunuch, most likely of Jewish faith, purchases the scroll in Israel and slowly returns to Ethiopia to give a report to his queen. Not one word of the New Testament has been written at this time, so the only Scripture the new Christians can provide are found in the Old Testament.⁹⁶ What better passage can they direct the eunuch to read than the prophecy of Isaiah?

Philip Explains the Scripture to the Eunuch

³²Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: "HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER; AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT, SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH. ³³"IN HUMILIATION HIS JUDGMENT WAS TAKEN AWAY; WHO SHALL RELATE HIS GENERATION? FOR HIS LIFE IS REMOVED FROM THE EARTH."⁹⁷ ³⁴And the eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please *tell me*, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself, or of someone else?" ³⁵And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. ³⁶And as they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" ³⁷~~[And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I~~

⁹³ In Egypt the title for the male ruler is "Pharaoh." In Persia the title for the male ruler is "Ahasuerus." In Rome the title for the male ruler is "Caesar." In Ethiopia the title for the female ruler is "Candace."

⁹⁴ 1 Kings 10:1-13

⁹⁵ In the design of the Temple and Synagogues, a place was built for the Gentiles who were converts to Judaism, and was called the court of the Gentiles. That section of the property was the only place the Gentiles could go when visiting for religious purposes. They did not have the freedom of the full-blooded Jews to roam the Temple area. They were allowed to go only as far as the gate; therefore, they were called proselytes at the gate.

⁹⁶ He had probably purchased a copy of the Greek Septuagint in Jerusalem. There are minor differences in the Hebrew text and the Septuagint. If the Ethiopian is not reading the Septuagint, we can at least be assured that Luke is quoting from the Septuagint.

⁹⁷ Isaiah 53:7-8

believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."]³⁸ And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch; and he baptized him.

The eunuch gives Philip the perfect opportunity to tell him about the Lord when he asks, "Please *tell me*, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself, or of someone else?"⁹⁸ Many critics of the Lord Jesus say that He cannot be found in the Old Testament, but the Lord found Himself in its pages.⁹⁹ Philip also knew that the Isaiah 53 passage clearly identifies Jesus as the messianic fulfillment of that prophecy. When Isaiah recorded these words, his pen was under the direction of the Holy Spirit and his individual knowledge and understanding was hazy at best. With the ability to gather all the prophecies and shed light on the passages, complete clarity occurs and the light illumines the fact that Jesus is the lamb of Isaiah 53.¹⁰⁰ In his testimony of the gospel, Philip evidently includes the purpose of baptism and the eunuch is ready to proclaim to the world his new faith in the Lord Jesus.

Philip Snatched Away by the Spirit of the Lord

Acts 8:³⁹ And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch saw him no more, but went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus; and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities, until he came to Caesarea.

The baptism is a complete water immersion, not just a sprinkling at the edge of the pool. The eunuch's baptism is just like John's baptism of Jesus. As they leave the pool of water, the Holy Spirit snatches Philip away. In the Latin translation of AD 390, Jerome uses the word "rapio" from which we obtain the word rapture.¹⁰¹ The picture Luke portrays in this passage is that the Holy Spirit raptures Philip to go on to his next assignment. As in its use in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament, Philip cannot counter the actions of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰² God forces him to leave the eunuch because his work is complete. The eunuch never sees Philip again.

Philip is no longer serving tables; he has been selected by the Holy Spirit to be an evangelist of the gospel of Jesus Christ. On his walk north, Philip preaches in every community he comes upon until he reaches Caesarea, making it his home town. Paul will be in Philip's home when Agabus warns him not to go to Jerusalem, but Paul will not heed the warning.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Acts 8:34

⁹⁹ **Luke 24:27** And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.

¹⁰⁰ **1 Peter 1:11-12** seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven-- things into which angels long to look.

2 Peter 1:19-21 And so we have the prophetic word *made* more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a *matter* of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

¹⁰¹ Jerome began the revision of the Latin New Testament in AD 382 and completed it in AD 390. He then began the Old Testament and completed it in AD 402.

¹⁰² Matthew 11:12; 13:19; John 6:15; 10:12; 10:28-29; Acts 23:10; 2 Corinthians 12:2,4; 1 Thessalonians 4:17; Jude 1:23; Revelation 12:5

¹⁰³ Acts 21:8-11