

## ***Philip, the Samaritans and the Ethiopian...***

### **Acts Chapter 8**

Before his ascension into heaven, Jesus promised his 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” (Acts 1 v 8). In chapters 2 to 6, following Pentecost, we see the apostles boldly preaching in Jerusalem; then chapter 7 relates Stephen’s defence and martyrdom, and resulting from that event “a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem; and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.” Verses 1 and 3 introduce us to Paul, who preached Christ to the ends of the earth, as he sought to bring the Gospel of salvation to the limits of the Roman Empire...

#### **Saul persecutes the church (Acts 8 v 1 to 3)**

- What do these verses tell us about Saul – his beliefs, his convictions, his zeal and his sincerity? How did Paul later view his actions? See Acts 22 v 3 to 5, Acts 26 v 9 to 11, Philippians 3 v 5 to 8.
- How did God use Stephen’s death to bring about the expansion of the church? Why do you think the apostles stayed behind in Jerusalem?

Saul of Tarsus, whom we know by his Roman name, Paul, later came to regret deeply this persecution of the church. He later wrote, “For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Corinthians 15 v 9). In Acts 26 v 11 Paul described what he regretted most: “And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.”

#### **Philip preaches to the Samaritans (Acts 8 v 4 to 25)**

Philip, like Stephen, was one of the seven ‘deacons’ chosen to serve the church family in practical ways when a dispute arose over the treatment of Hellenist widows (Acts 6 v 5). Forced to flee persecution, he ended up in Samaria. Some 600 years earlier the Assyrians conquered this area of northern Israel, deported the wealthy and middle-class Jews, and then moved in a pagan population from afar. These intermarried with the lowest classes of remaining Jews, and from these people came the Samaritans – regarded with contempt by New Testament Jews (see John 4 v 9).

- Why do you think Philip’s ministry in Samaria was so successful? See Acts 1 v 8.
- Simon preyed on people’s ignorance and superstitions. How did he respond to Philip’s preaching (v 13)? But was his profession of faith genuine (v 18 to 24)? How did Peter deal with the core issues?

The idea that the Samaritan Christians received the Holy Spirit in a subsequent experience (v 14 to 17) has caused much controversy. One explanation is that the Samaritans really did accept salvation through Jesus as a result of Philip’s preaching, but God withheld the ‘fullness’ of the Holy Spirit until it could be bestowed on them by the leading apostles Peter and John, who would in a sense ‘authenticate’ their conversion. God’s purpose was to ensure continuity between the church in Jerusalem and the new church in Samaria, and to guard against any future division.

“Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me” (v 24) – Simon asked Peter to pray he would be spared the consequences of his sin. This shows that he felt a true conviction of the Holy Spirit, yet was not yet willing to humble his own heart before God. The door of repentance was open to Simon if he would only take it (v 22)...

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## Philip preaches to the Ethiopian official (Acts 8 v 26 to 40)

“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...” (v 27) – on the desert road, Philip encountered an Ethiopian proselyte to Judaism returning from Jerusalem, reading the Bible! Ethiopia, much larger than modern-day Ethiopia, was the land from where the Queen of Sheba came, who saw the glory of Solomon’s kingdom and professed faith in the God of Israel. It is possible that some elements of the Jewish faith had been passed on through the centuries to men like this servant of the queen...

- What sort of a person was this Ethiopian official? How had God prepared him before Philip met him? What did he need to do before he was able to go “on his way rejoicing” (v 39)?
- How was Philip directed to the Ethiopian? The Ethiopian was reading Isaiah 53 v 7 and 8. He had just read Isaiah 53 v 6. Beginning with this passage of Scripture, how would you tell someone “the good news about Jesus” (verse 35)? Can you see how the whole Bible – Old and New Testament – points towards salvation through Jesus Christ? Philip “ran up to the chariot” (v 30). Why would his job have been more difficult if he had walked instead?

“Heard him reading Isaiah the prophet” (v 30) – it was common in the ancient world to read aloud. Philip knew what the Ethiopian was reading by listening as he read. Philip knew at that moment that God had given him an open door and a prepared heart. Clearly God had arranged this meeting between Philip and the Ethiopian: this is a wonderful example of how God opens doors for evangelism.

“Beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus” (v 35) – Philip’s effective evangelism consisted in explaining who Jesus is (“like a lamb”, v 32) and what he has done for us (“like a sheep he was led to the slaughter”). Explaining who Jesus is and what he has done for us is the essence of the gospel. ““See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?”” (v 36) – the Ethiopian’s response shows that he truly believed, and wanted to be baptized to declare his belief. He saw the truth of God and knew that it was for him.

“The Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more... Philip found himself at Azotus” (v 39, 40) – the Holy Spirit carried Philip away as he and the Ethiopian came out of the water, and then he was transported supernaturally to the city of Azotus. This is a strange, almost unprecedented event in the Scriptures; but a similar thing happened when the disciples’ boat came immediately to its destination (John 6 v 16 to 21), and a similar thing will happen when the church is caught up together with Jesus at the ‘*harpazo*’ (1 Thessalonians 4 v 15 to 18). “[He] went on his way rejoicing” (v 39 – the joy of the Ethiopian, even after Philip’s strange departure, shows that his faith was firmly rooted in God.

“As he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea” (v 40) – this shows that Philip started preaching not only to Samaritan cities, but also the Gentile cities such as Caesarea. This is the beginning of the gospel’s spread to the ends of the earth (Acts 1 v 8). No wonder Philip is the only one in the New Testament specifically given the title, ‘the evangelist’ (Acts 21 v 8).

*Stephen was stoned to death; the church was persecuted, and Christians were scattered. Yet the gospel was preached in Samaria, and in the city where Philip went there was ‘great joy’ (v 8).*

*Philip was told to leave Samaria and go to the desert. Yet as a result an influential Ethiopian – a top Government official – became a Christian, and ‘went on his way rejoicing’. There has been a church in Ethiopia ever since that time...*

*Imagine what surprising consequences God has in store for you, when you trust and obey Jesus!*