***Philip the Evangelist (Acts 21:8)***

**Summer 2021, Acts 8:4-40 August 15, 2021**

***. . . so there was great joy in the city.  
. . . and the eunuch did not see [Philip] again, but went on his way rejoicing.*Acts 8:8,39**

**Introduction: The joy test**

**Philip is scattered**

*4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. 5 Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. 6 When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. 7 With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. 8 So there was great joy in that city . . . .  
12 But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.*

Acts 8:4-7,12

1) Like Paul, Philip begins with THE \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (see Keller’s “Hope” sermon)

2) The “signs” prepare the Samaritans for the “when” of the good news

**Follow up in Samaria**

14 *When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. 15 When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, 16 because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.*

Acts 8

1) Peter and John (see Luke 9:54!) are there to include the Samaritans in the church

2) This baptism is for the benefit of the Jerusalem and Samaria

**Simon**

*9 Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, 10 and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, “This man is the divine power known as the Great Power.” 11 They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. 12 But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. 13 Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.*

*14 When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. 15 When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, 16 because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.*

*18 When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money 19 and said, “Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”*

*20 Peter answered: “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! 21 You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. 22 Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. 23 For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.”*

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

Acts 8

1) The power of God is always a threat to the power of god (superstition, occult or syncretism)

2) Simon’s story reflects the danger of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (but God still uses him!)

3) The pastoral question: where is Simon’s heart? Doug’s key observation: where is Simon’s joy?  
 See James 2:19; 1 John 4:1, 7:25-43; John 6:66-71; Heb. 6:1-6 and Heidelberg Catechism #21

**Samaria and Jerusalem**

*25 When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.*

*Acts 8*

1) This is the continuing fulfillment of the Jesus’ Acts 1:8 commission

2) Luke’s attention is on the “many” who continue to be included

**Philip meets the Ethiopian**

*26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” 27 So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. 29 The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”*

*30 Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.*

*31 “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture:*

*“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,*

*and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.*

*33 In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.*

*Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.”*

*34 The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” 35 Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.*

*36 As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized?” 38 And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. 40 Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.*

Acts 8:26-40

1) Both Philip and the Ethiopian are \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

2) The LXX translation of Isaiah 53 makes the Jesus picture even more clear! (See Kistemaker)

3) The gospel only “begins” with Jesus’ suffering – Philip must have learned the Luke 24:27 lesson

4) There are both descriptive and prescriptive pictures of baptism:

descriptive prescriptive

One thing is most important: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

5) Philip ends his “scattering” in the heart of the Roman Judea – where God wants him! (Acts 21:8-9)



**Resources for further studies in Acts**

The Bible Project team has great stuff on Acts at [*https://open.life.church/items/179224-poster-jpg*](https://open.life.church/items/179224-poster-jpg)

Spurgeon has fewer sermons on Acts available than I would hope at [*http://www.romans45.org/spurgeon/index/r\_ac.htm*](http://www.romans45.org/spurgeon/index/r_ac.htm)

I really appreciate J.C. Ryle’s essay on conversion in Acts: *https://www.monergism.com/conversion-j-c-ryle*[*https://www.onergism.com/conversion-j-c-ryle*](https://www.onergism.com/conversion-j-c-ryle)

Alexander Maclaren has an especially helpful commentary on Acts available at [*https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8397/pg8397.html*](https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8397/pg8397.html)

Deffinbaugh has a helpful introduction at *[https://bible.org/seriespage/unique-contribution-book-acts](https://bible.org/seriespage/unique-contribution-book-acts )*  
His Acts series is at [*https://bible.org/series/studies-book-acts*](https://bible.org/series/studies-book-acts)His sermon on this text is at  
[*https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40*](https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40)

Tim Keller has a wonderful sermon at [*https://www.monergism.com/signs-king-%E2%80%93-acts-237-47*](https://www.monergism.com/signs-king-%E2%80%93-acts-237-47)and his important [“Hope for the City”](http://storage.cloversites.com/highpeakfellowship/documents/Hope_For_The_City.pdf) sermon on Acts 8 begins with the Stephen story.

I have really appreciated John Stott’s *The Spirit, The Church and the World: The Message of Acts* (IVP, 1990) and F. F. Bruce’s work: *New Testament History* (Doubleday, 1980) and *The Book of the Acts* (Eerdmans, 1984).

For this passage, I also like Kistemaker’s commentary (Baker Book House, 1990).

Carl Trueman has a good analysis of the world’s opposition in his recent essay “Dogma Drives the Christian Life” at [*https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2021/08/dogma-drives-the-christian-life*](https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2021/08/dogma-drives-the-christian-life)

Carl Trueman’s conclusion in *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* (Crossway, 2020) influenced my thinking on the church. His third point, the importance of proper natural law thinking, is reflected in Kevin DeYoung’s blog at [*https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/gods-good-gift-in-making-us-men-and-women/*](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/gods-good-gift-in-making-us-men-and-women/)

# Acts Timeline (ESV Study Bible)

# Table Description automatically generated

### Alexander Maclaren’s commentary on Acts: at [*https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8397/pg8397.html*](https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8397/pg8397.html)

### SEED SCATTERED AND TAKING ROOT

'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 everywhere preaching the word. 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, 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. 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.'—ACTS viii. 1-17.

The note of time in verse 1 is probably to be rendered as in the Revised Version, 'on that day.' The appetite for blood roused by Stephen's martyrdom at once sought for further victims. Thus far the persecutors had been the rulers, and the persecuted the Church's leaders; but now the populace are the hunters, and the whole Church the prey. The change marks an epoch. Luke does not care to make much of the persecution, which is important to him chiefly for its bearing on the spread of the Church's message. It helped to diffuse the Gospel, and that is why he tells of it. But before proceeding to narrate how it did so, he gives us a picture of things as they stood at the beginning of the assault.

Three points are noted: the flight of the Church except the Apostles, the funeral of Stephen, and Saul's eager search for the disciples. We need not press 'all,' as if it were to be taken with mathematical accuracy. Some others besides the Apostles may have remained, but the community was broken up. They fled, as Christ had bid them do, if persecuted in one city. Brave faithfulness goes with prudent self-preservation, and a valuable 'part of valour is discretion.' But the disciples who fled were not necessarily less courageous than the Apostles who remained, nor were the latter less prudent than the brethren who fled. For *noblesse oblige*; high position demands high virtues, and the officers should be the last to leave a wreck. The Apostles, no doubt, felt it right to hold together, and preserve a centre to which the others might return when the storm had blown itself out.

In remarkable contrast with the scattering Church are the 'devout men' who reverently buried the martyr. They were not disciples, but probably Hellenistic Jews (Acts ii. 5); perhaps from the synagogue whose members had disputed with Stephen and had dragged him to the council. His words or death may have touched them, as many a time the martyr's fire has lighted others to the martyr's faith. Stephen was like Jesus in his burial by non-disciples, as he had been in his death.

The eager zeal of the young Pharisee brought new severity into the persecution, in his hunting out his victims in their homes, and in his including women among his prisoners. There is nothing so cruel as so-called religious zeal. So Luke lifts the curtain for a moment, and in that glimpse of the whirling tumult of the city we see the three classes, of the brave and prudent disciples, ready to flee or to stand and suffer as duty called; the good men who shrunk from complicity with a bloodthirsty mob, and were stirred to sympathy with his victims; and the zealot, who with headlong rage hated his brother for the love of God. But the curtain drops, and Luke turns to his true theme. He picks up the threads again in verse 4, telling of the dispersal of the disciples, with the significant addition of their occupation when scattered,—'preaching the word.'

The violent hand of the persecutor acted as the scattering hand of the sower. It flung the seeds broadcast, and wherever they fell they sprouted. These fugitives were not officials, nor were they commissioned by the Apostles to preach. Without any special command or position, they followed the instincts of believing hearts, and, as they carried their faith with them, they spoke of it wherever they found themselves. A Christian will be impelled to speak of Christ if his personal hold of Him is vital. He should need no ecclesiastical authorisation for that. It is riot every believer's duty to get into a pulpit, but it *is* his duty to 'preach Christ.' The scattering of the disciples was meant by men to put out the fire, but, by Christ, to spread it. A volcanic explosion flings burning matter over a wide area.

Luke takes up one of the lines of expansion, in his narrative of Philip's doings in Samaria, which he puts first because Jesus had indicated Samaria first among the regions beyond Judaea (i. 8). Philip's name comes second in the list of deacons (vi. 5), probably in anticipation of his work in Samaria. How unlike the forecast by the Apostles was the actual course of things! They had destined the seven for purely 'secular' work, and regarded preaching the word as their own special engagement. But Stephen saw and proclaimed more clearly than they did the passing away of Temple and ritual; and Philip, on his own initiative, and apparently quite unconscious of the great stride forward that he was taking, was the first to carry the gospel torch into the regions beyond. The Church made Philip a 'deacon,' but Christ made him an 'evangelist'; and an evangelist he continued, long after he had ceased to be a deacon in Jerusalem (xxi. 8).

Observe, too, that, as soon as Stephen is taken away, Philip rises up to take his place. The noble army of witnesses never wants recruits. Its Captain sends men to the front in unbroken succession, and they are willing to occupy posts of danger because He bids them. Probably Philip fled to Samaria for convenience' sake, but, being there, he probably recalled Christ's instructions in chapter i. 8, repealing His prohibition in Matthew x. 5. What a different world it would be, if it was true of Christians now that they 'went down into the city of So-and-So and proclaimed Christ'! Many run to and fro, but some of them leave their Christianity at home, or lock it up safely in their travelling trunks.

Jerusalem had just expelled the disciples, and would fain have crushed the Gospel; despised Samaria received it with joy. 'A foolish nation' was setting Israel an example (Deut. xxxii. 21; Rom. x. 19). The Samaritan woman had a more spiritual conception of the Messiah than the run of Jews had, and her countrymen seem to have been ready to receive the word. Is not the faith of our mission converts often a rebuke to us?

But the Gospel met new foes as well as new friends on the new soil. Simon the sorcerer, probably a Jew or a Samaritan, would have been impossible on Jewish ground, but was a characteristic product of that age in the other parts of the Roman empire. Just as, to-day, people who are weary of Christianity are playing with Buddhism, it was fashionable in that day of unrest to trifle with Eastern magic-mongers; and, of course, demand created supply, and where there was a crowd of willing dupes, there soon came to be a crop of profit-seeking deceivers. Very characteristically, the dupes claimed more for the deceiver than he did for himself. He probably could perform some simple chemical experiments and conjuring tricks, and had a store of what sounded to ignorant people profound teaching about deep mysteries, and gave forth enigmatical utterances about his own greatness. An accomplished charlatan will leave much to be inferred from nods and hints, and his admirers will generally spin even more out of them than he meant. So the Samaritans bettered Simon's 'some great one' into 'that power of God which is called great,' and saw in him some kind of emanation of divinity.

The quack is great till the true teacher comes, and then he dwindles. Simon had a bitter pill to swallow when he saw this new man stealing his audience, and doing things which he, with his sorceries, knew that he only pretended to do. Luke points very clearly to the likeness and difference between Simon and Philip by using the same word ('gave heed') in regard to the Samaritan's attitude to both, while in reference to Philip it was 'the things spoken by' him, and in reference to Simon it was himself to which they attended. The one preached Christ, the other himself; the one 'amazed' with 'sorceries,' the other brought good tidings and hid himself, and his message called, not for stupid, open-mouthed astonishment, but for belief and obedience to the name of Jesus. The whole difference between the religion of Jesus and the superstitions which the world calls religions, is involved in the significant contrast, so inartificially drawn.

'Simon also himself believed.' Probably there was in his action a good deal of swimming with the stream, in the hope of being able to divert it; but, also, he may have been all the more struck by Philip's miracles, because he knew a real one, by reason of his experience of sham ones. At any rate, neither Philip nor Luke drew a distinction between his belief and that of the Samaritans; and, as in their cases, his baptism followed on his profession of belief. But he seems not to have got beyond the point of wondering at the miracles, as it is emphatically said that he did even after his baptism. He believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but was more interested in studying Philip to find out how he did the miracles than in listening to his teaching. Such an imperfect belief had no transforming power, and left him the same man as before, as was soon miserably manifest.

The news of Philip's great step forward reached the Apostles by some unrecorded means. It is not stated that Philip reported his action, as if to superiors whose authorisation was necessary. More probably the information filtered through other channels. At all events, sending a deputation was natural, and needs not to be regarded as either a sign of suspicion or an act necessary in order to supplement imperfections inherent in the fact that Philip was not an Apostle. The latter meaning has been read—not to say forced—into the incident; but Luke's language does not support it. It was not because they thought that the Samaritans were not admissible to the full privileges of Christians without Apostolic acts, but because they 'heard that Samaria had received the word,' that the Apostles sent Peter and John.

The Samaritans had not yet received the Holy Ghost—that is, the special gifts, such as those of Pentecost. That fact proves that baptism is not necessarily and inseparably connected with the gift of the Spirit; and chapter x. 44, 47, proves that the Spirit may be given before baptism. As little does this incident prove that the imposition of Apostolic hands was necessary in order to the impartation of the Spirit. Luke, at any rate, did not think so; for he tells how Ananias' hand laid on the blind Saul conveyed the gift to him. The laying on of hands is a natural, eloquent symbol, but it was no prerogative of the Apostles (Acts x. 17; 1 Tim. iv. 14).

The Apostles came down to Samaria to rejoice in the work which their Lord had commanded, and which had been begun without their help, to welcome the new brethren, to give them further instruction, and to knit closely the bonds of unity between the new converts and the earlier ones. But that they came to bestow spiritual gifts which, without them, could not have been imparted, is imported into, not deduced from, the simple narrative of Luke.

### SIMON THE SORCERER

'Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God.'—ACTS viii. 21.

The era of the birth of Christianity was one of fermenting opinion and decaying faith. Then, as now, men's minds were seething and unsettled, and that unrest which is the precursor of great changes in intellectual and spiritual habitudes affected the civilised world. Such a period is ever one of predisposition to superstition. The one true bond which unites God and man being obscured, and to the consciousness of many snapped, men's minds become the prey of visionary terrors. Demand creates supply, and the magician and miracle-worker, the possessor of mysterious ways into the Unknown, is never far off at such a time. Partly deceived and partly deceiving, he is as sure a sign of the lack of profound religious conviction and of the presence of unsatisfied religious aspirations in men's souls, as the stormy petrel or the floating seaweed is of a tempest on the seas.

So we find the early preachers of Christianity coming into frequent contact with pretenders to magical powers. Sadly enough, they were mostly Jews, who prostituted their clearer knowledge to personal ends, and having tacked on to it some theosophic rubbish which they had learned from Alexandria, or mysticism which had filtered to them from the East, or magic arts from Phrygia, went forth, the only missionaries that Judaism sent out, to bewilder and torture men's minds. What a fall from Israel's destination, and what a lesson for the stewards of the 'oracles of God'!

Of such a sort were Elymas, the sorcerer whom Paul found squatting at the ear of the Roman Governor of Cyprus; the magicians at Ephesus; the vagabond Jews exorcists, who with profitable eclecticism, as they thought, tried to add the name of Jesus as one more spell to their conjurations; and, finally, this Simon the sorcerer. Established in Samaria, he had been juggling and conjuring and seeing visions, and professing to be a great mysterious personality, and had more than permitted the half-heathen Samaritans, who seem to have had more religious susceptibility and less religious knowledge than the Jews, and so were a prepared field for all such pretenders, to think of him as in some sense an incarnation of God, and perhaps to set him up as a rival or caricature of Him who in the neighbouring Judaea was being spoken of as the power of God, God manifest in the flesh.

To the city thus moved comes no Apostle, but a Christian man who begins to preach, and by miracles and teaching draws many souls to Christ.

The story of Simon Magus in his attitude to the Gospel is a very striking and instructive one. It presents for our purpose now mainly three points to which I proceed to refer.

I. An instance of a wholly unreal, because inoperative, faith.

'He believed,' says the narrative, and believing was baptized. It is worth noting, in passing, how the profession of faith without anything more was considered by the Early Church sufficient. But obviously his was no true faith. The event showed that it was not.

What was it which made his faith thus unreal?

It rested wholly on the miracles and signs; he 'wondered' when he saw them. Of course, miracles were meant to lead to faith; but if they did not lead on to a deeper sense of one's own evil and need, and so to a spiritual apprehension, then they were of no use.

The very beginning of the story points to the one bond that unites to God, as being the sense of need and the acceptance with heart and will of the testimony of Jesus Christ. Such a disposition is shown in the Samaritans, who make a contrast with Simon in that they believed Philip *preaching*, while Simon believed him *working miracles*. The true place of miracles is to attract attention, to prepare to listen to the word. They are only introductory. A faith may be founded on them, but, on the other hand, the impressions which they produce may be evanescent. How subordinate then, their place at the most! And the one thing which avails is a living contact of heart and soul with Jesus Christ.

Again, Simon's belief was purely an affair of the understanding. We are not to suppose, I think, that he merely believed in Philip as a miracle-worker; he must have had some notion about Philip's Master, and we know that it was belief in Jesus as the Christ that qualified in the Apostolic age for baptism. So it is reasonable to suppose that he had so much of head knowledge. But it was only head knowledge. There was in it no penitence, no self-abandonment, no fruit in holy desires; or in other words, there was no heart. It was credence, but not trust.

Now it does not matter how much or how little you know about Jesus Christ. It does not matter how you have come to that knowledge. It does not matter though you have received Christian ordinances as Simon had. If your faith is not a living power, leading to love and self-surrender, it is really nought. And here, on its earliest conflict with heathen magic, the gospel proclaims by the mouth of the Apostle what is true as to all formalists and nominal Christians: 'Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter, *for* thy heart is not right.' One thing only unites to God—a faith which cleanses the heart, a faith which lays hold on Christ with will and conscience, a faith which, resting on penitent acknowledgment of sin, trusts wholly to His great mercy.

II. An instance of the constant tendency to corrupt Christianity with heathen superstition.

The Apostles' bestowal of the Holy Ghost, which was evidently accompanied by visible signs, had excited Simon's desire for so useful an aid to his conjuring, and he offers to buy the power, judging of them by himself, and betraying that what he was ready to buy he was also intending to sell.

The offer to buy has been taken as his great sin. Surely it was but the outcome of a greater. It was not only what he offered, but what he desired, that was wrong. He wanted that on 'whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost.' That preposterous wish was quite as bad as, and was the root of, his absurd offer to bribe Peter. Bribe Peter, indeed! Some of Peter's successors would have been amenable to such considerations, but not the horny-handed fisherman who had once said, 'Silver and gold have I none.'

Peter's answer, especially the words of my text, puts the Christian principle in sharp antagonism to the heathen one.

Simon regards what is sacred and spiritual purely as part of his stock-in-trade, contributing to his prestige. He offers to buy it. And the foundation of all his errors is that he regards spiritual gifts as capable of being received and exercised apart altogether from moral qualifications. He does not think at all of what is involved in the very name, 'the Holy Ghost.'

Now, on the other hand, Peter's answer lays down broadly and sharply the opposite truth, the Christian principle that a heart right in the sight of God is the indispensable qualification for all possession of spiritual power, or of any of the blessings which Jesus gives.

How the heart is made right, and what constitutes righteousness is another matter. That leads to the doctrine of repentance and faith.

The one thing that makes such participation impossible is being and continuing in 'the gall of bitterness, and the bond of iniquity.' Or, to put it into more modern words, all the blessings of the Gospel are a gift of God, and are bestowed only on moral conditions. Faith which leads to love and personal submission to the will of God makes a man a Christian. Therefore, outward ordinances are only of use as they help a man to that personal act.

Therefore, no other man or body of men can do it for us, or come between us and God.

And in confirmation, notice how Peter here speaks of forgiveness. His words do not sound as if he thought that he held the power of absolution, but he tells Simon to go to God who alone can forgive, and refers Simon's fate to God's mercy.

These tendencies, which Simon expresses so baldly, are in us all, and are continually reappearing. How far much of what calls itself Christianity has drifted from Peter's principle laid down here, that moral and spiritual qualifications are the only ones which avail for securing 'part or lot in the matter' of Christ's gifts received for, and bestowed on, men! How much which really rests on the opposite principle, that these gifts can be imparted by men who are supposed to possess them, apart altogether from the state of heart of the would-be recipient, we see around us to-day! *Simony* is said to be the securing ecclesiastical promotion by purchase. But it is much rather the belief that 'the gift of God can be purchased with' anything but personal faith in Jesus, the Giver and the Gift. The effects of it are patent among us. Ceremonies usurp the place of faith. A priesthood is exalted. The universal Christian prerogative of individual access to God is obscured. Christianity is turned into a kind of magic.

III. An instance of the worthlessness of partial convictions.

Simon was but slightly moved by Peter's stern rebuke. He paid no heed to the exhortation to pray for forgiveness and to repent of his wickedness, but still remained in substantially his old error, in that he accredited Peter with power, and asked him to pray for him, as if the Apostle's prayer would have some special access to God which his, though he were penitent, could not have. Further, he showed no sense of sin. All that he wished was that 'none of the things which ye have spoken come upon me.'

How useless are convictions which go no deeper down than Simon's did!

What became of him we do not know. But there are old ecclesiastical traditions about him which represent him as a bitter enemy in future of the Apostle. And Josephus has a story of a Simon who played a degrading part between Felix and Drusilla, and who is thought by some to have been he. But in any case, we have no reason to believe that he ever followed Peter's counsel or prayed to God for forgiveness. So he stands for us as one more tragic example of a man, once 'not far from the kingdom of God' and drifting ever further away from it, because, at the fateful moment, he would not enter in. It is hard to bring such a man as near again as he once was. Let us learn that the one key which opens the treasury of God's blessings, stored for us all in Jesus, is our own personal faith, and let us beware of shutting our ears and our hearts against the merciful rebukes that convict us of 'this our wickedness,' and point us to the 'Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world,' and therefore our sin.

### A MEETING IN THE DESERT

'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. 29. Then the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot. 80. And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest? 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. 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. 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.'—ACTS viii. 26-40.

Philip had no special divine command either to flee to, or to preach in, Samaria, but 'an angel of the Lord' and afterwards 'the Spirit,' directed him to the Ethiopian statesman. God rewards faithful work with more work. Samaria was a borderland between Jew and Gentile, but in preaching to the eunuch Philip was on entirely Gentile ground. So great a step in advance needed clear command from God to impel to it and to justify it.

I. We have, then, first, the new commission. Philip might well wonder why he should be taken away from successful work in a populous city, and despatched to the lonely road to Gaza. But he obeyed at once. He knew not for what he was sent there, but that ignorance did not trouble or retard him. It should be enough for us to see the next step. 'We walk by faith, not by sight,' for we none of us know what comes of our actions, and we get light as we go. Do to-day's plain duty, and when to-morrow is to-day its duty will be plain too. The river on which we sail winds, and not till we round the nearest bend do we see the course beyond. So we are kept in the peaceful posture of dependent obedience, and need to hold our communications with God open, that we may be sure of His guidance.

No doubt, as Philip trudged along till he reached the Gaza road, he would have many a thought as to what he was to find there, and, when he came at last to the solitary track, would look eagerly over the uninhabited land for an explanation of his strange and vague instructions. But an obedient heart is not long left perplexed, and he who looks for duty to disclose itself will see it in due time.

II. So we have next the explanation of the errand. Luke's 'Behold!' suggests the sudden sight of the great man's cortege in the distance. No doubt, he travelled with a train of attendants, as became his dignity, and would be conspicuous from afar. Philip, of course, did not know who he was when he caught sight of him, but Luke tells his rank at once, in order to lay stress on it, as well as to bring out the significance of his occupation and subsequent conversion. Here was a full-blooded Gentile, an eunuch, a courtier, who had been drawn to Israel's God, and was studying Israel's prophets as he rode. Perhaps he had chosen that road to Egypt for its quietness. At any rate, his occupation revealed the bent of his mind.

Philip felt that the mystery of his errand was solved now, and he recognised the impulse to break through conventional barriers and address the evidently dignified stranger, as the voice of God's Spirit, and not his own. How he was sure of that we do not know, but the distinction drawn between the former communication by an angel and this from the Spirit points to a clear difference in his experiences, and to careful discrimination in the narrator. The variation is not made at random. Philip did not mistake a buzzing in his ears from the heating of his own heart for a divine voice. We have here no hallucinations of an enthusiast, but plain fact.

How manifestly the meeting of these two, starting so far apart, and so ignorant of each other and of the purpose of their being thrown together, reveals the unseen hand that moved each on his own line, and brought about the intersection of the two at that exact spot and hour! How came it that at that moment the Ethiopian was reading, of all places in his roll, the very words which make the kernel of the gospel of the evangelical prophet? Surely such 'coincidences' are a hard nut to crack for deniers of a Providence that shapes our ends!

It is further to be noticed that the eunuch's conversion does not appear to have been of importance for the expansion of the Church. It exercised no recorded influence, and was apparently not communicated to the Apostles, as, if it had been, it could scarcely have failed to have been referred to when the analogous case of Cornelius was under discussion. So, divine intervention and human journeying and work were brought into play simply for the sake of one soul which God's eye saw to be ripe for the Gospel. He cares for the individual, and one sheep that can be reclaimed is precious enough in the Shepherd's estimate to move His hand to action and His heart to love. Not because he was a man of great authority at Candace's court, but because he was yearning for light, and ready to follow it when it shone, did the eunuch meet Philip on that quiet road.

III. The two men being thus strangely brought together, we have next the conversation for the sake of which they were brought together. The eunuch was reading aloud, as people not very much used to books, or who have some difficult passage in hand, often do. Philip must have been struck with astonishment when he caught the, to him, familiar words, and must have seen at once the open door for his preaching. His abrupt question wastes no time with apologies or polite, gradual approaches to his object. Probably the very absence of the signs of deference to which he was accustomed impressed the eunuch with a dim sense of the stranger's authority, which would be deepened by the home-thrust of his question.

The wistful answer not only shows no resentment at the brusque stranger's thrusting himself in, but acknowledges bewilderment, and responds to the undertone of proffered guidance in the question. A teacher has often to teach a pupil his ignorance, to begin with; but it should be so done as to create desire for instruction, and to kindle confidence in him as instructor. It is insolent to ask, 'Understandest thou?' unless the questioner is ready and able to help to understand.

The invitation to a seat in the great man's chariot showed how eagerness to learn had obliterated distinctions of rank, and swiftly knit a new bond between these two, who had never heard of each other five minutes before. A true heart will hail as its best and closest friend him who leads it to know God's mind more clearly. How earthly dignities dwindle when God's messenger lays hold of a soul!

So the chariot rolls on, and through the silence of the desert the voices of these two reach the wondering attendants, as they plod along. The Ethiopian was reading the Septuagint translation of Isaiah, which, though it missed part of the force of the original, brought clearly before him the great figure of a Sufferer, meek and dumb, swept from the earth by unjust judgment. He understood so much, but what he did not understand was who this great, tragic Figure represented. His question goes to the root of the matter, and is a burning question to-day, as it was all these centuries ago on the road to Gaza. Philip had no doubt of the answer. Jesus was the 'lamb dumb before its shearers.' This is not the place to enter on such wide questions, but we may at least affirm that, whatever advance modern schools have made in the criticism and interpretation of the Old Testament, the very spirit of the whole earlier Revelation is missed if Jesus is not discerned as the Person to whom prophet and ritual pointed, in whom law was fulfilled and history reached its goal.

No doubt much instruction followed. How long they had rode together before they came to 'a certain water' we know not, but it cannot have been more than a few hours. Time is elastic, and when the soil is prepared, and rain and sunlight are poured down, the seed springs up quickly. People who deny the possibility of 'sudden conversions' are blind to facts, because they wear the blinkers of a theory. Not always have they who 'anon with joy receive' the word 'no root in themselves.'

As is well known, the answer to the eunuch's question (v. 37) is wanting in authoritative manuscripts. The insertion may have been due to the creeping into the text of a marginal note. A recent and most original commentator on the Acts (Blass) considers that this, like other remarkable readings found in one set of manuscripts, was written by Luke in a draft of the book, which he afterwards revised and somewhat abbreviated into the form which most of the manuscripts present. However that may be, the required conditions in the doubtful verse are those which the practice of the rest of the Acts shows to have been required. Faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God was the qualification for the baptisms there recorded.

And there was no other qualification. Philip asked nothing about the eunuch's proselytism, or whether he had been circumcised or not. He did not, like Peter with Cornelius, need the evidence of the gift of the Spirit before he baptized; but, notwithstanding his experience of an unworthy candidate in Simon the sorcerer, he unhesitatingly administered baptism. There was no Church present to witness the rite. We do not read that the Holy Ghost fell on the eunuch.

That baptism in the quiet wady by the side of the solitary road, while the swarthy attendants stood in wonder, was a mighty step in advance; and it was taken, not by an Apostle, nor with ecclesiastical sanction, but at the bidding of Christian instinct, which recognised a brother in any man who had faith in Jesus, the Son of God. The new faith is bursting old bonds. The universality of the Gospel is overflowing the banks of Jewish narrowness. Probably Philip was quite unconscious of the revolutionary nature of his act, but it was done, and in it was the seed of many more.

The eunuch had said that he could not understand unless some man guided him. But when Philip is caught away, he does not bewail the loss of his guide. He went on his road with joy, though his new faith might have craved longer support from the crutch of a teacher, and fuller enlightenment. What made him able to do without the guide that a few hours before had been so indispensable? The presence in his heart of a better one, even of Him whom Jesus promised, to guide His servants into all truth. If those who believe that Scripture without an authorised interpreter is insufficient to lead men aright, would consider the end of this story, they might find that a man's dependence on outward teachers ceases when he has God's Spirit to teach him, and that for such a man the Word of God in his hand and the Spirit of God in his spirit will give him light enough to walk by, so that, in the absence of all outward instructors, he may still be filled with true wisdom, and in absolute solitude may go 'on his way rejoicing.'

### PHILIP THE EVANGELIST

'But Philip was found at Azotus: and passing through he preached in all the cities, till he came to Caesarea.'—ACTS viii. 40.

The little that is known about Philip, the deacon and evangelist, may very soon be told. His name suggests, though by no means conclusively, that he was probably one of the so-called Hellenists, or foreign-born and Greek-speaking Jews. This is made the more probable because he was one of the seven selected by the Church, and after that selection appointed by the Apostles, to dispense relief to the poor. The purpose of the appointment being to conciliate the grumblers in the Hellenist section of the Church, the persons chosen would probably belong to it. He left Jerusalem during the persecution 'that arose after the death of Stephen.' As we know, he was the first preacher of the Gospel in Samaria; he was next the instrument honoured to carry the Word to the first heathen ever gathered into the Church; and then, after a journey along the sea-coast to Caesarea, the then seat of government, he remained in that place in obscure toil for twenty years, dropped out of the story, and we hear no more of him but for one glimpse of his home in Caesarea.

That is all that is told about him. And I think that if we note the contrast of the office to which men called him, and the work to which God set him; and the other still more striking contrast between the brilliancy of the beginning of his course, and the obscurity of his long years of work, we may get some lessons worth the learning. I take, then, not only the words which I read for my text, but the whole of the incidents connected with Philip, as our starting-point now; and I draw from them two or three very well-worn, but none the less needful, pieces of instruction.

I. First, then, we may gather a thought as to Christ's sovereignty in choosing His instruments.

Did you ever notice that events exactly contradicted the intentions of the Church and of the Apostles, in the selection of Philip and his six brethren? The Apostles said, 'It is not reason that we should leave the Word of God and serve tables. Pick out seven relieving-officers; men who shall do the secular work of the Church, and look after the poor; and we will give ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word.' So said man. And what did facts say? That as to these twelve, who were to 'give themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word,' we never hear that by far the larger proportion of them were honoured to do anything worth mentioning for the spread of the Gospel. Their function was to be 'witnesses,' and that was all. But, on the other hand, of the men that were supposed to be fitted for secular work, two at all events had more to do in the expansion of the Church, and in the development of the universal aspects of Christ's Gospel, than the whole of the original group of Apostles. So Christ picks His instruments. The Apostles may say, 'These shall do so-and-so; and we will do so-and-so.' Christ says, 'Stephen shall proclaim a wider Gospel than the Apostles at first had caught sight of, and Philip shall be the first who will go beyond the charmed circle of Judaism, and preach the Gospel.'

It is always so. Christ chooses His instruments where He will; and it is not the Apostle's business, nor the business of an ecclesiastic of any sort, to settle his own work or anybody else's. The Commander-in-Chief keeps the choosing of the men for special service in His own hand. The Apostolic College said, 'Let them look after the poor, and leave us to look after the ministry of the Word'; Christ says, 'Go and join thyself to that chariot, and speak there the speech that I shall bid thee.'

Brethren, do you listen for that voice calling you to your tasks, and never mind what men may be saying. Wait till *He* bids, and you will hear Him speaking to you if you will keep yourselves quiet. Wait till He bids you, and then be sure that you do it. Christ chooses His instruments, and chooses them often in strange places.

II. The next lesson that I would take from this story is the spontaneous speech of a believing heart.

There came a persecution that scattered the Church. Men tried to fling down the lamp; and all that they did was to spill the oil, and it ran flaming wherever it flowed. For the scattered brethren, without any Apostle with them, with no instruction given to them to do so, wherever they went carried their faith with them; and, as a matter of course, wherever they went they spoke their faith. And so we read that, not by appointment, nor of set purpose, nor in consequence of any ecclesiastical or official sanction, nor in consequence of any supernatural and distinct commandment from heaven, but just because it was the natural thing to do, and they could not help it, they went everywhere, these scattered men of Cyprus and Cyrene, preaching the word.

And when this Philip, whom the officials had relegated to the secular work of distributing charity, found himself in Samaria, he did the like. The Samaritans were outcasts, and Peter and John had wanted to bring down fire from heaven to consume them. But Philip could not help speaking out the truth that was in his heart.

So it always will be: we can all talk about what we are interested in. The full heart cannot be condemned to silence. If there is no necessity for speech felt by a professing Christian, that professing Christian's faith is a very superficial thing. 'We cannot but speak the things that we have seen and heard,' said one of the Apostles, thereby laying down the great charter of freedom of speech for all profound convictions. 'Thy word was as a fire in my bones when I said, I will speak no more in Thy name,' so petulant and self-willed was I, 'and I was weary with forbearing,' and ashamed of my rash vow; 'and I could not stay.'

Dear friends, do you carry with you the impulse for utterance of Christ's name wherever you go? And is it so sweet in your hearts that you cannot but let its sweetness have expression by your lips? Surely, surely this spontaneous instinctive utterance of Philip, by which a loving heart sought to relieve itself, puts to shame the 'dumb dogs' that make up such an enormous proportion of professing Christians. And surely such an experience as his may well throw a very sinister light on the reality—nay! I will not say the *reality*, that would be too uncharitable—but upon the depth and vitality of the profession of Christianity which these silent ones make.

III. Another lesson that seems to me strikingly illustrated by the story with which we are concerned, is the guidance of a divine hand in common life, and when there are no visible nor supernatural signs.

Philip goes down to Samaria because he must, and speaks because he cannot help it. He is next bidden to take a long journey, from the centre of the land, away down to the southern desert; and at a certain point there the Spirit says to him, 'Go! join thyself to this chariot.' And when his work with the Ethiopian statesman is done, then he is swept away by the power of the Spirit of God, as Ezekiel had been long before by the banks of the river Chebar, and is set down, no doubt all bewildered and breathless, at Azotus—the ancient Ashdod—the Philistine city on the low-lying coast. Was Philip less under Christ's guidance when miracle ceased and he was left to ordinary powers? Did he feel as if deserted by Christ, because, instead of being swept by the strong wind of heaven, he had to tramp wearily along the flat shore with the flashing Mediterranean on his left hand reflecting the hot sunshine? Did it seem to him as if his task in preaching the Gospel in these villages through which he passed on his way to Caesarea was less distinctly obedience to the divine command than when he heard the utterance of the Spirit, 'Go down to the road which leads to Gaza, which is desert'? By no means. To this man, as to every faithful soul, the guidance that came through his own judgment and common sense, through the instincts and impulses of his sanctified nature, by the circumstances which he devoutly believed to be God's providence, was as truly direct divine guidance as if all the angels of heaven had blown commandment with their trumpets into his waiting and stunned ears.

And so you and I have to go upon our paths without angel voices, or chariots of storm, and to be contented with divine commandments less audible or perceptible to our senses than this man had at one point in his career. But if we are wise we shall hear Him speaking the word. We shall not be left without His voice if we wait for it, stilling our own inclinations until His solemn commandment is made plain to us, and then stirring up our inclinations that they may sway us to swift obedience. There is no gulf, for the devout heart, between what is called miraculous and what is called ordinary and common. Equally in both does God manifest His will to His servants, and equally in both is His presence perceived by faith. We do not need to envy Philip's brilliant beginning. Let us see that we imitate his quiet close of life.

IV. The last lesson that I would draw is this—the nobility of persistence in unnoticed work.

What a contrast to the triumphs in Samaria, and the other great expansion of the field for the Gospel effected by the God-commanded preaching to the eunuch, is presented by the succeeding twenty years of altogether unrecorded but faithful toil! Persistence in such unnoticed work is made all the more difficult, and to any but a very true man would have been all but impossible, by reason of the contrast which such work offered to the glories of the earlier days. Some of us may have been tried in a similar fashion, all of us have more or less the same kind of difficulty to face. Some of us perhaps may have had gleams, at the beginning of our career, that seemed to give hope of fields of activity more brilliant and of work far better than we have ever had or done again in the long weary toil of daily life. There may have been abortive promises, at the commencement of your careers, that seemed to say that you would occupy a more conspicuous position than life has had really in reserve for you. At any rate, we have all had our dreams, for

  'If Nature put not forth her power  
  About the opening of the flower,  
  Who is there that could live an hour?'

and no life is all that the liver of it meant it to be when he began. We dream of building palaces or temples, and we have to content ourselves if we can put up some little shed in which we may shelter.

Philip, who began so conspicuously, and so suddenly ceased to be the special instrument in the hands of the Spirit, kept plod, plod, plodding on, with no bitterness of heart. For twenty years he had no share in the development of Gentile Christianity, of which he had sowed the first seed, but had to do much less conspicuous work. He toiled away there in Caesarea patient, persevering, and contented, because he loved the work, and he loved the work because he loved Him that had set it. He seemed to be passed over by his Lord in His choice of instruments. It was he who was selected to be the first man that should preach to the heathen. But did you ever notice that although he was probably in Caesarea at the time, Cornelius was not bid to apply to *Philip*, who was at his elbow, but to send to Joppa for the Apostle Peter? Philip might have sulked and said: 'Why was I not chosen to do this work? I will speak no more in this Name.'

It did not fall to his lot to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. One who came after him was preferred before him, and the Hellenist Saul was set to the task which might have seemed naturally to belong to the Hellenist Philip. He too might have said, 'He must increase, but I must decrease.' No doubt he did say it in spirit, with noble self-abnegation and freedom from jealousy. He cordially welcomed Paul to his house in Caesarea twenty years afterwards, and rejoiced that one sows and another reaps; and that so the division of labour is the multiplication of gladness.

A beautiful superiority to all the low thoughts that are apt to mar our persistency in unobtrusive and unrecognised work is set before us in this story. There are many temptations to-day, dear brethren, what with gossiping newspapers and other means of publicity for everything that is done, for men to say, 'Well, if I cannot get any notice for my work I shall not do it.'

Boys in the street will refuse to join in games, saying, 'I shall not play unless I am captain or have the big drum.' And there are not wanting Christian men who lay down like conditions. 'Play well thy part' wherever it is. Never mind the honour. Do the duty God appoints, and He that has the two mites of the widow in His treasury will never forget any of our works, and at the right time will tell them out before His Father, and before the holy angels.

# The People God Uses (Acts 8:1-40)

Deffinbaugh at [*https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40*](https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40)

### Introduction[2](https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40" \l "P15_5877)

In the Old Testament, God seldom used those who appeared to be the “most likely to succeed.” He used Moses, who was an escaped fugitive and who made all kinds of excuses as to why he was not the one God needed to deliver the nation Israel from its Egyptian bondage. He used David to kill Goliath, in spite of his youth and the disparaging comments of his brothers. He used Samson and Balaam, and even Balaam’s donkey. God used Pharaoh and his hardened heart to demonstrate His power over the gods of Egypt.

The New Testament is no different. He used “foot in mouth” Peter to play a major role in the proclamation of the gospel, and yet Peter was a man who denied his Lord publicly. The Apostle Paul summed up God’s amazing way of using the most unlikely people when he wrote:

26 Think about the circumstances of your call, brothers and sisters. Not many were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were born to a privileged position. 27 But God chose what the world thinks foolish to shame the wise, and God chose what the world thinks weak to shame the strong. 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, what is regarded as nothing, to set aside what is regarded as something, 29 so that no one can boast in his presence. 30 He is the reason you have a relationship with Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” ([1 Corinthians 1:26-31](javascript:%7b%7d)).

The Book of Acts is no exception. God has already used Peter to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah to crowds of people in Jerusalem, as well as to the Jewish Sanhedrin, the highest religious and civil court in Judaism. God used Stephen to preach in Greek-speaking synagogues, which led to his arrest and trial before the Sanhedrin. Instead of defending himself, Stephen indicted his accusers, showing their charges to be inconsistent with Old Testament teaching, and their resistance to God’s Spirit to be entirely consistent with Israel’s rebellion against God and His appointed servants.

Our last lesson ended with the stoning of Stephen. [Acts 8](javascript:%7b%7d) is a description of the spread of the gospel following Stephen’s death. In our text, God will employ several unlikely individuals to promote the preaching of the gospel. Who God uses and how He uses them will prove instructive and encouraging to us. Let us listen to God’s Spirit as He speaks to us through this great text.

#### Saul, the “Father of Missions” in Acts [Acts 8:1-3](javascript:%7b%7d)

1 And Saul agreed completely with killing him. Now on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were forced to scatter[3](https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40" \l "P23_9163) throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. 2 Some devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. 3 But Saul was trying to destroy the church; entering one house after another, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison ([Acts 8:1-3](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Just a couple of verses before this, we read these words by which Luke introduced Paul to the readers of the Book of Acts:

When they had driven him out of the city, they began to stone him, and the witnesses laid their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul ([Acts 7:58](javascript:%7b%7d)).

At first glance, it might look as though Saul played but a small part in the death of Stephen. But this was hardly the case, as we begin to discover in the introductory verses of chapter 8. We are told Saul was in wholehearted agreement with those who killed Stephen. This appears to have whetted his appetite for more aggressive opposition to the saints dwelling in Jerusalem. We now find Saul going house to house, seeking to identify those who were Christians. He then arrested those who believed in Jesus and hauled them off to prison.

Opposition to the preaching of the gospel seems to take a turn here. For whatever reason, the manifestations of the opposition to the gospel have changed. Initially, opposition was directed against the apostles and not so much toward the church as a whole. Thanks to Gamaliel’s counsel, the Sanhedrin seems to have significantly reduced its overt opposition to the apostles as they took more of a “wait and see” approach to their preaching. Now the opposition seems to come more from the unbelieving Greek-speaking Jews, and it is focused on the new believers, rather than on their native Hebraic leaders (the twelve). This resulted in the scattering of the church with only the apostles remaining behind in Jerusalem.

Notice how Luke contrasts Saul ([Acts 8:3](javascript:%7b%7d)), who had a hand in Stephen’s death and who is persecuting the church, with those devout men who mourned over the death of Stephen and gave him a proper burial ([Acts 8:2](javascript:%7b%7d)). In the Old Testament, godly men retrieved the bodies of Saul and his sons and gave them a proper burial, for which David commended them ([1 Samuel 31:12-13](javascript:%7b%7d); see [2 Samuel 2:4-7](javascript:%7b%7d)). Those who buried Stephen were surely putting themselves at risk by identifying with him, especially since a great persecution had broken out against the believers in Jerusalem.

#### Success in Samaria [Acts 8:4-8](javascript:%7b%7d)

4 Now those who had been forced to scatter went around proclaiming the good news of the word. 5 Philip went down to the main city of Samaria and began proclaiming the Christ to them. 6 The crowds were paying attention with one mind to what Philip said, as they heard and saw the miraculous signs he was performing. 7 For unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, were coming out of many who were possessed, and many paralyzed and lame people were healed. 8 So there was great joy in that city ([Acts 8:4-8](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Luke does something interesting here, and I believe he does so to conform to his outline for the Book of Acts, which he disclosed in [Acts 1:8](javascript:%7b%7d):

“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 farthest parts of the earth” ([Acts 1:8](javascript:%7b%7d)).

So far in Acts, we have seen the gospel spread throughout Jerusalem with the church growing rapidly – until the stoning of Stephen, that is. Now the church has scattered. In [Acts 8:4-25](javascript:%7b%7d), Luke describes how the gospel is proclaimed in Samaria. In [Acts 9:31](javascript:%7b%7d), we are told that “**the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria experienced peace and thus was strengthened.”** So by [Acts 9:31](javascript:%7b%7d), the gospel had been preached in Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria. It is not until [Acts 11:19](javascript:%7b%7d) that Luke takes up the preaching of the gospel beyond Judea and Samaria. And thus the preaching of the gospel follows that geographical pattern God set down in [Acts 1:8](javascript:%7b%7d).

Those who were scattered from Jerusalem went forth preaching the good news of the gospel. A number of believers were scattered throughout Samaria ([Acts 1:2](javascript:%7b%7d)). We would do well to recall the strained relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans. The Samaritans were considered inferior because they were a mixed race. After years of warning by the prophets, the northern kingdom of Israel persisted in its idolatry, and so God gave them over to the Assyrians (see [2 Kings 17](javascript:%7b%7d)). The Assyrians carried off much of the population of Israel to distant places and replaced the Israelites with subject peoples who were transplanted from other lands. The result was a mixed race that persisted in idolatry.

From this point on, there was great hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans. The Samaritan woman at the well was therefore shocked that Jesus would have anything to do with her:

7 A Samaritan woman came to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me some water to drink.” 8 (For his disciples had gone off into the town to buy supplies.) 9 So the Samaritan woman said to him, “How can you – a Jew – ask me, a Samaritan woman, for water to drink?” (For Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans.) ([John 4:7-9](javascript:%7b%7d))

When Jesus sent His disciples to seek accommodations in a Samaritan village, they were turned away because they were on their way to Jerusalem. James and John knew how they wanted to deal with this:

51 Now when the days drew near for him to be taken up, Jesus set out resolutely to go to Jerusalem. 52 He sent messengers on ahead of him. As they went along, they entered a Samaritan village to make things ready in advance for him, 53 but the villagers refused to welcome him, because he was determined to go to Jerusalem. 54 Now when his disciples James and John saw this, they said, “**Lord, do you want us to call fire to come down from heaven and consume them?**” 55 But Jesus turned and rebuked them ([Luke 9:51-55](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

In the heat of a debate with Jesus, the Jewish religious leaders chose these words as the most insulting remark they could think of:

“Aren’t we correct in saying that you are a Samaritan and are possessed by a demon?” ([John 8:48](javascript:%7b%7d))

Jesus did not share this hatred for Samaritans. He healed ten lepers. At least one of these lepers – the only one to return to Jesus to give thanks – was a Samaritan ([Luke 17:11-19](javascript:%7b%7d)). Thanks to the woman at the well – a Samaritan woman – not only she but many from her village came to faith in Jesus ([John 4:3-42](javascript:%7b%7d)). When Jesus needed an illustration of loving one’s neighbor, He told the story of the Good Samaritan ([Luke 10:25-37](javascript:%7b%7d)). Surely some who lived in Samaria were at least vaguely familiar with Jesus.

Though many persecuted saints from Jerusalem found their way to Samaria, Philip seems to have been selected as an example (a rather dramatic one at that) of those who were scattered. He made his way to a city of Samaria, perhaps “the chief city” of Samaria.[4](https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40" \l "P43_16269) Philip began to preach Jesus as the Christ in this Samaritan city. If you have ever done any street preaching, you know that the crowds aren’t that big, and the presentation doesn’t capture the attention of all. Many will pass by, ignoring the preaching altogether. These folks all hung on every word Philip spoke. Luke tells us they “**were paying attention with one mind**” ([Acts 8:6](javascript:%7b%7d)). I believe our text supplies two main reasons for this rapt attention to Philip’s preaching.

The first reason for the unusual attention given to Philip and to his preaching is recorded in verses 6-8. Philip’s ministry, like that of Stephen ([Acts 6:8-15](javascript:%7b%7d)) and the apostles before that ([Acts 2:43; 5:12](javascript:%7b%7d)), was authenticated by many signs and wonders. In Philip’s case, many of those who were demon possessed were dramatically delivered as the demons came out with loud shrieks. In addition, many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. As a result, there was great rejoicing in that city. No doubt these signs and wonders gave Philip’s preaching a “ring of authority,” so that people paid close attention to what he said.

There is a second reason for the attention people paid to Philip’s preaching, and it is described for us in the following verses.

#### Simon the Magician [Acts 8:9-13](javascript:%7b%7d)

9 Now in that city was a man named Simon, who had been practicing magic and amazing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great. 10 All the people, from the least to the greatest, paid close attention to him, saying, “This man is the power of God that is called ‘Great.’” 11 And they paid close attention to him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. 12 But when they believed Philip as he was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they began to be baptized, both men and women. 13 Even Simon himself believed, and after he was baptized, he stayed close to Philip constantly, and when he saw the signs and great miracles that were occurring, he was amazed ([Acts 8:9-13](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Suppose that Harry Houdini were alive today and that he lived in Dallas, Texas. If he were scheduled for a performance, a large crowd would surely show up. For years, Houdini amazed the crowds with his incredible escapes. Now suppose that a young preacher came to town and that his preaching was accompanied by many awesome signs and wonders. Imagine that it became known that Houdini was so taken with this young preacher that he gave up his performances to follow that young preacher wherever he went. He would sit in the front row and marvel at the signs and wonders that accompanied the preacher’s sermons. Would you not agree that Houdini’s awe and wonder, along with his appearances in the crowds who listened to the preacher, would greatly contribute to the popularity of this young preacher?

I think this is what happened with Philip and Simon the magician. For years, Simon had been amazing the folks of this Samaritan city – and the rest of Samaria – with his magic. Through slight of hand (or possibly by employing powers from the dark side), his power seemed unlimited. Simon was not reluctant to promote himself, either. Luke tells us that he “**claimed to be someone great**” ([Acts 8:9](javascript:%7b%7d)). We are then told that the people thought of him as God. (In their minds, he is virtually the counterpart of Jesus.) Simon made no attempt to correct the popular misconception. I suspect that he promoted such thinking. In some ways, then, Simon was a Samaritan “messiah.” What an impact his “conversion” made on the people of Samaria. And not only did he profess belief and submit to baptism, he virtually attached himself to Philip, following him wherever he preached. No wonder the Samaritans were listening so intently to Philip.

#### The Arrival of the Apostles [Acts 8:14-17](javascript:%7b%7d)

14 Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. 15 These two went down and prayed for them so that they would receive the Holy Spirit. 16 (For the Spirit had not yet come upon any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) 17 Then Peter and John placed their hands on the Samaritans, and they received the Holy Spirit ([Acts 8:14-17](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Until now, signs and wonders had only been performed by Philip (and of course the twelve apostles and Stephen before him). Philip’s signs and wonders seemed to be limited to exorcisms and healings. Philip had baptized new believers, including Simon, but none had yet received the Holy Spirit. God sovereignly delayed this until the arrival of two apostles, who were sent from Jerusalem as representatives of the twelve ([Acts 8:14](javascript:%7b%7d)). I have to smile when I recall that John was one of the two disciples who had asked permission to call down fire from heaven on a Samaritan village ([Luke 9:52-56](javascript:%7b%7d)). Now, as it were, he calls down the Spirit of God to fall upon these new Samaritan believers.

Much discussion has been devoted to explaining why the Spirit waited to “baptize” these new believers. We must begin by noting that our text does not directly give us the answer. Several possible reasons do come to mind. First, these new believers must be embraced as full-fledged members of the church by the Jewish Christians (see [Ephesians 2:11-22](javascript:%7b%7d)). Who better to validate their faith in Jesus than two of the apostles from Jerusalem? In [Acts 11](javascript:%7b%7d), Peter will argue that he had to accept the new believers to whom he preached in the house of Cornelius and that he was obligated to baptize them. Here, Peter and John witness the “**baptism of the Spirit**,” which is God’s seal on the conversion of these believers. How could they deny what God had done, to which He bore witness through the coming of the Spirit on these believers?

Second, these new Samaritan believers needed the affirmation and confirmation of their equal standing in Jesus by the actions of the apostles sent from Jerusalem. Just as the Jerusalem Jews needed confirmation of the conversion of these Samaritans, so the Samaritans needed confirmation of their acceptance and affirmation by the Jewish apostles, as represented by Peter and John.

Third, there may be a deliberate “division of powers” here. That is, Philip had a certain function, but that function had its limits. The apostles took up where Philip’s responsibilities (and authority) left off. This was a matter of practical import. Philip was very highly regarded by the Samaritans. There was a danger of Philip being too highly esteemed (as can be seen with Simon). Notice how quickly Simon transfers his attention to Peter and John after their arrival. It might have been very unhealthy for Philip to have carried out all of the spectacular functions which, instead, were divided between Philip and Peter and John.

#### Simon and Simon (Peter) [Acts 8:18-25](javascript:%7b%7d)

18 Now Simon, when he saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, offered them money, 19 saying, “Give me this power too, so that everyone I place my hands on may receive the Holy Spirit.” 20 But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could acquire God’s gift with money! 21 You have no share or part 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 he may perhaps forgive you for the intent of your heart. 23 For I see that you are bitterly envious and in bondage to sin.” 24 But Simon replied, “You pray to the Lord for me so that nothing of what you have said may happen to me.” 25 So after Peter and John had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, proclaiming the good news to many Samaritan villages as they went ([Acts 8:18-25](javascript:%7b%7d)).

I find it interesting that Simon the magician did not express a desire to obtain the power that was demonstrated by the signs and wonders performed by Philip. He was very eager, however, to obtain the power that he saw as a result of the laying on of hands by Peter and John. What was the difference? While Luke tells us that Philip cast out demons and healed those who were paralyzed and lame ([Acts 8:7](javascript:%7b%7d)), he does not tell us exactly what happened when Peter and John laid their hands on the new believers. Something rather spectacular must have occurred, or Simon would not have been so eager to obtain this power. I think it is safe to speculate that something happened that was similar to Pentecost, as described in [Acts 2:1-4](javascript:%7b%7d). We do know that when the apostles laid their hands on these Samaritan believers, they received the Holy Spirit ([Acts 8:17](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Simon was wrong to offer money to obtain the power to do what Peter and John had been doing. In the first place, this power was restricted to Peter and John. Not even Philip had been given this kind of power. Simon, therefore, was asking to have the power of an apostle. Second, Simon was asking for the power to bestow the Holy Spirit on everyone ([Acts 8:19](javascript:%7b%7d)). Whoever he laid his hands on would receive the Spirit. The Holy Spirit was to come only upon genuine believers. Simon seems to care little about the necessity of belief; he wants merely to market the manifestations of the Spirit as a commodity. Third, by viewing the gift of the Spirit as a commodity to be bought and sold, he implied that this was a matter of works, not of grace. How horrible it would be if salvation could be bought and sold. Buying and selling the presence of the Spirit is just as wrong, and for the same reason. Salvation and the indwelling of the Spirit is a gift of grace, not goods to be bought and sold.

The seriousness of Simon’s sin is indicated by the severity of Peter’s response to Simon’s request:

“May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could acquire God’s gift with money!” ([Acts 8:20](javascript:%7b%7d))

J. B. Phillips renders Peter’s words, “To hell with you and your money.” In a footnote, Phillips indicates that his rendering is precisely how the original text reads, and he bemoans the fact that many translations have paraphrased these words. How ironic that a paraphrase is more accurate than a supposedly literal rendering.

There are many who would like to conclude that Simon never really was saved. They would like to believe that Christians never had such worldly motives, but we should know our own hearts well enough to admit that on occasion our motives are not that different from those of Simon. Think, for example, of the sinful motives of Ananias and Sapphira in [Acts 5:1-11](javascript:%7b%7d), or of Gehazi’s sin in [2 Kings 5:20-27](javascript:%7b%7d).

It is not so easy to write Simon off as an unbeliever. We must first come to terms with Luke when he tells us that Simon believed and was baptized ([Acts 8:13](javascript:%7b%7d)). Even after Simon tries to buy apostolic powers, Peter does not call on him to repent and be saved, but rather to repent of this specific sin, and ask forgiveness for it ([Acts 8:22](javascript:%7b%7d)). Peter has a particular sin in mind and not Simon’s sins in general.

Furthermore, Peter told Simon that he had “**no share or part in this matter**” ([Acts 8:21](javascript:%7b%7d)). A simple reading of this statement would seem to lead one to conclude that “**this matter**” is the bestowing of the Spirit, not the matter of being saved. Simon is “**bitterly envious and in bondage to sin**” ([Acts 8:23](javascript:%7b%7d)). I understand these words in the light of this text in Deuteronomy:

14 “It is not with you alone that I am making this covenant by oath, 15 but with whoever stands with us here today before the Lord our God as well as those not with us here today. 16 “(For you know how we lived in the land of Egypt and how we crossed through the nations as we traveled. 17 You have seen their detestable things and idols of wood, stone, silver, and gold.) 18 Beware that the heart of no man, woman, clan, or tribe among you turns away from the Lord our God today to pursue and serve the gods of those nations; **beware that there is among you no root producing poisonous and bitter fruit**. 19 When such a person hears the words of this oath he secretly blesses himself and says, “I will have peace though I continue to walk with a stubborn spirit.” This will destroy the watered ground with the parched. 20 The Lord will be unwilling to forgive him, and his intense anger will rage against that man; all the curses written in this scroll will fall upon him and the Lord will obliterate his name from memory. 21 The Lord will single him out for judgment from all the tribes of Israel according to all the curses of the covenant written in this scroll of the law” ([Deuteronomy 29:14-21](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

This is a very interesting text, a text that applies to Simon and to his sin. In Deuteronomy, Israel is about to enter into the Promised Land. They have entered into a covenant relationship with the God of Israel. These are a people who have a history of idolatry.[5](https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40" \l "P68_30458) They are well aware of the idols of Egypt and of the nations through which they have passed. They could easily be tempted to embrace some of these gods and, at the same time, still profess allegiance to God.[6](https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40" \l "P69_30768) God’s covenant was not given as a “good luck charm,” a license to do whatever they wanted and still expect God’s blessings. And so Moses warns the Israelites not to turn back to their old ways and to serve other gods (idols). He tells them not to expect God’s blessings when they continue to live as they once did, before they were redeemed. This would make them a “**root producing poisonous and bitter fruit**” ([Deuteronomy 29:18](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Simon seems to be doing what God warned Israel not to do. Previous to his coming to faith, Simon’s magic not only appears to have made him a very comfortable living; it also made him a very popular and powerful man. When the gospel came to Samaria, Simon believed, but he did not seem to grasp the implications of his faith in regard to his previous way of life. It would seem that Simon asked to buy the power and authority of the apostles to bestow the Holy Spirit so that this might be his new, and even more powerful, performance. He was seeking to upgrade his previous performance. In reality, this was turning back to his old ways, to his old magic, and thus it was turning away from God. That was a most dangerous thing to do.

Simon’s response to Peter’s rebuke is less than encouraging: “You pray to the Lord for me so that nothing of what you have said may happen to me” ([Acts 8:24](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Peter urged Simon to repent of this sin, and instead, Simon urged Peter and John to pray for him themselves ([Acts 8:24](javascript:%7b%7d)). It is as though he fears that his prayers will not count, but he assumes that the prayers of Peter and John will. At best, this reveals an inadequate grasp of doctrine. As Paul put it,

5 For there is one God and one intermediary between God and humanity, Christ Jesus, himself human, 6 who gave himself as a ransom for all, revealing God’s purpose at his appointed time ([1 Timothy 2:5-6](javascript:%7b%7d)).

The writer to the Hebrews said, 15 For we do not have a high priest incapable of sympathizing with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way just as we are, yet without sin. 16 Therefore let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace whenever we need help ([Hebrews 4:15-16](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Simon seems focused on the apostles, as though their prayers for him would be more effectual than his own prayer of repentance. That is a serious error, but I believe there is another error here as well. Simon is not as concerned with the fact that he has sinned as he is about the consequences of his sin. He asks the apostles to pray so that the consequences of his sin might not come upon him. I guess what I am saying is this: Simon does not express concern for the impact of his sin on his relationship with the Lord; instead, he only seems only to be concerned about suffering the penalty for his sin.

### Is Simon Saved?

A good deal of attention has been given to this question, and it is interesting to see how many want to disown Simon as a true believer. Let’s face it; it makes us uncomfortable to think that a true believer could be guilty of this kind of sin. How much easier it is to explain Simon’s actions as those of one outside the faith. After all, if Simon could sin this way as a Christian, then I am in danger of committing the same sin. If Simon is not a true believer, then I don’t need to be very concerned about his sin.

I confess that I have been inclined to view Simon as a non-Christian myself. But I am most reluctant to conclude that the Bible does not mean what it rather clearly states. We are told plainly that Simon himself believed ([Acts 8:13](javascript:%7b%7d)). In the context, the rather clear inference is that Simon believed, just as other Samaritans had (see [Acts 8:13](javascript:%7b%7d)). One might even go so far as to say that some Samaritans were drawn to faith in Jesus because Simon believed.[7](https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40" \l "P81_34624) I think we are better off to take the text as it is rather than set its statements aside. And so we will deal with Simon as though he was a believer (as the text states). Isn’t his sin one which any Christian could commit? I believe so, and thus there is in Peter’s strong rebuke a warning for us all. We will come back to this at the close of this message.

#### Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch [Acts 8:26-40](javascript:%7b%7d)

26 Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go south on the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a desert road.) 27 So he got up and went. There he met an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and was returning home, sitting in his chariot, reading the prophet [Isaiah. 29](javascript:%7b%7d) Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.” 30 So Philip ran up to it and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. He asked him, “Do you understand what you’re reading?” 31 The man replied, “How in the world can I, unless someone guides me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 Now the passage of scripture the man was reading was this: “He was led like a sheep to slaughter, and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. 33 In humiliation justice was taken from him. Who can describe his posterity? For his life was taken away from the earth.” 34 Then the eunuch said to Philip, “Please tell me, who is the prophet saying this about – himself or someone else?” 35 So Philip started speaking, and beginning with this scripture proclaimed the good news about Jesus to him. 36 Now as they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “Look, there is water! What is to stop me from being baptized?” 38 So he ordered the chariot to stop, and both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 39 Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him any more, but went on his way rejoicing. 40 Philip, however, found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through the area, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea ([Acts 8:26-40](javascript:%7b%7d)).

I have heard it said that Philip was called to leave a thriving and successful ministry in Samaria to go out to this desert road leading from Jerusalem to Gaza. I’m not so sure that this is the case. In verse 25, we read that the Apostles Peter and John have finished their ministry in Samaria and have headed back to Jerusalem, preaching Jesus as they went. It looks as though the task in Samaria was finished, so that the evangelist (Philip)[8](https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40" \l "P85_37475) could leave to minister elsewhere. The disciples left, heading back to Jerusalem, while Stephen was directed to go the opposite way on this road, toward Gaza.

Notice that Philip is not told why he is to go this way, although he will shortly find out. He is not told anything regarding what ministry he will perform, or to whom. He is simply instructed to go in a certain direction. Philip faithfully obeys, and thus he encounters the eunuch. This eunuch was a very influential man. He was a court official of the queen of Ethiopia and was in charge of her treasury ([Acts 8:27](javascript:%7b%7d)).

His visit to Jerusalem was not official. He was interested enough in the Jewish faith to make this long journey. He had come to worship and was now returning home. He had somehow acquired a portion (if not all) of the Book of Isaiah and was reading it aloud as he traveled. The Spirit of God now directed Philip to make contact with the chariot. Even here, divine guidance is not entirely specific. Assuming that there was at least a driver, and perhaps someone else (a guard?), Philip is pointed in the right direction and is required to assess the situation and respond appropriately.

Philip could hardly miss this opportunity. The eunuch was reading aloud from the words of [Isaiah 53](javascript:%7b%7d). Specifically, Luke indicates that he was reading the words of [Isaiah 53:7-8](javascript:%7b%7d). If this is where he was in Isaiah at that moment, then we can confidently assume that he has already read the earlier verses, which are all about the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. Philip did not need to be told what to do next. He simply asked the eunuch if he understood what he was reading. The eunuch did not. He could not figure out whether Isaiah was speaking of himself, or of someone else. He invited Philip into his chariot, so that he could explain the meaning of this prophecy.

Opening his mouth,[9](https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40" \l "P90_39402) Philip began at this text and preached the Lord Jesus to him. How I would have loved to hear that Bible study. It must have been something similar to what Jesus taught the two men on the road to Emmaus (see [Luke 24:25-27](javascript:%7b%7d)). The heart of the eunuch was prepared, and he quickly embraced Jesus as his Messiah. They approached some source of water, perhaps an oasis of some kind, and the eunuch seized this opportunity to be baptized. When they came out of the water, Philip was snatched away by the Spirit, and the eunuch went on his way back to Ethiopia, rejoicing in his salvation.

### Conclusion

I set out in this message to find the connective link between these two accounts in chapter 8 of Acts: (1) the story of the salvation of the Samaritans (including Simon); and, (2) the account of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. The one clear link between these two accounts is Philip. He is instrumental in the conversion of many Samaritans, as well as in the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. But is this the only connection, the only link? I think not. I perceive it to be the obvious link, which prompts us to look more deeply for other, more subtle (but substantial) links.

While there may be similarities between the Samaritan revival and the salvation of the eunuch, let’s begin by considering the differences in these two accounts. I believe that Luke has deliberately set these accounts side-by-side so that we will note a contrast between them.

There are some obvious contrasts, of course. Philip is in the city in Samaria; he is on a desert road with the eunuch. The Samaritans are Israel’s neighbors, but they are greatly disliked by the Jews because they are considered half-breeds; the eunuch is a God-fearing Gentile, and thus accepted as such by the Jews. These, however, are not the points of contrast on which I wish to focus.

Consider the degree to which signs and wonders have played a role thus far in the Book of Acts. It was the miracle at Pentecost that first attracted a crowd, to which Peter preached a powerful message about Jesus the Messiah ([Acts 2](javascript:%7b%7d)). It was the healing of the lame man outside the temple which created the next occasion for Peter to preach, so that many more came to faith. As persecution began to arise, the church prayed for boldness and for God’s hand to be apparent in signs and wonders, and God answered their prayers ([Acts 4:23-31](javascript:%7b%7d)). The death of Ananias and Sapphira was also understood as an act of God, bringing fear to believers and unbelievers alike ([Acts 5:11, 13](javascript:%7b%7d)). Nevertheless, the hand of God continued to work in a powerful way ([Acts 5:14-16](javascript:%7b%7d)). Stephen was likewise distinguished by his powerful preaching, accompanied by wonders and signs ([Acts 6:8-10](javascript:%7b%7d)).

With all these miracles, one might become overly attracted to signs and wonders, “addicted,” dare I say, to the spectacular. I believe that this happened to Elijah, and God found it necessary to correct his thinking regarding the spectacular:

9 He went into a cave there and spent the night. All of a sudden the Lord spoke to him, “Why are you here, Elijah?” 10 He answered, “I have been absolutely loyal to the Lord, the sovereign God, even though the Israelites have abandoned the agreement they made with you, torn down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left and now they want to take my life.” 11 The Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord. Look, the Lord is ready to pass by.” A very powerful wind went before the Lord, digging into the mountain and causing landslides, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the windstorm there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. 12 After the earthquake, there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. After the fire, there was a soft whisper. 13 When Elijah heard it, he covered his face with his robe and went out and stood at the entrance to the cave. All of a sudden a voice asked him, “Why are you here, Elijah?” ([1 Kings 19:9-13](javascript:%7b%7d))

God was not to be found in the great wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire, but rather in the soft whisper. There may be some today who suppose that unless there are unusual signs and wonders, God may not be present, and He may not be powerfully at work in our midst. This is not to deny signs and wonders, but only to show that God can powerfully save men without them.

Now consider our text. Up to this point in Acts, God’s presence and power have been demonstrated by great signs and wonders. But He has also been at work through great preaching. When we come to [Acts 8](javascript:%7b%7d), we are hardly surprised to find signs and wonders associated with Philip’s ministry ([Acts 8:5-8](javascript:%7b%7d), 13). Simon’s obsession with miracles (both those of Philip and those of Peter and John) should serve to caution us regarding similar fixations. We then see Simon’s obsession turn to sin when he seeks to buy the power to bestow the Spirit of God on men (for a fee, no doubt). As the account of the Samaritan revival comes to a close, we do not have a very good feeling about Simon. All does not end “happily ever after” for him. At the least, we wonder if he ever truly repented of this particular sin.

And then we come to the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch at the end of chapter 8. Here the spectacular is largely missing. Granted, God’s Spirit directs Philip to the desert road where he meets the eunuch, and He then instructs Philip to make contact with this man. But none of this supernatural guidance is known to the eunuch. From his vantage point, nothing spectacular has occurred prior to his faith in Jesus. That is, he was not aware of anything spectacular, so spectacular events had no bearing on his conversion – unlike Simon the magician, whose conversion seems to have been heavily influenced by signs and wonders. Only after the eunuch was saved and baptized did he observe something spectacular – Philip’s amazing exit.

Since signs and wonders were not the explanation for the conversion of the eunuch, to what do we attribute his conversion? I think the answer is: the Word of God, the Spirit of God, and the testimony of this man of God. The eunuch’s heart was already prepared when Philip encountered him. He must have had a fair knowledge of the Jewish faith, enough to prompt him to travel a long distance to worship in Jerusalem. He must have paid a high price for his copy of Scripture. The Spirit of God not only prompted Philip to make the journey to meet the eunuch, He also opened the heart of the eunuch to receive Stephen’s exposition of the Word.

I think the point is clear. Signs and wonders were necessary to accredit the apostles as God’s authoritative spokesmen ([2 Corinthians 12:11-13](javascript:%7b%7d); [Hebrews 2:1-4](javascript:%7b%7d)). But they are not necessary for the on-going work of evangelism.[10](https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40" \l "P103_46801) The conversion of Simon, based heavily on signs and wonders, is certainly not described as being superior to the conversion of the eunuch, which was not prompted by such miracles. Put differently, the conversion of the eunuch was every bit as miraculous as that of Simon and the Samaritans. Signs and wonders are thus portrayed as optional, and not as requirements, for evangelism.

Next, I find in our text further examples of the sovereignty of God. I see this in the way God employs all things to promote His glory. God used the opposition of the Sanhedrin, the stoning of Stephen, and the opposition of Saul to scatter the Jerusalem saints, and thus to set in motion the fulfillment of the Great Commission. God used Simon the magician to testify to the true and greater power of God through Philip and the apostles (Peter and John). Because of Simon’s fascination with the signs and wonders performed by these men, many Samaritans gave a listening ear to the preaching of the gospel, and many came to faith. I believe that God also used the Ethiopian eunuch to proclaim the gospel in Ethiopia. God used those who obeyed Him, those who sought Him, and those who opposed Him to accomplish salvation, and thus to glorify Himself.

Furthermore, we see how God sovereignly prepared the hearts of men. God prepared Saul for salvation through his instruction by Gamaliel, by his role in the stoning of Stephen, and by his opposition to the church. God prepared the people of Samaria by using Simon the magician. (He may also have prepared the Samaritan people by the salvation of the Samaritan woman – see [John 4:3-42](javascript:%7b%7d).) God’s preparation of the heart of the Ethiopian is quite evident. He was ready for the witness of Philip.

I also see the sovereignty of God in the way He worked strategically through key individuals. The other day, my friend, Fred Smith, was discussing the concept of the “key log.” Logs are sometimes transported to a lumber mill by way of a river. At times, the logs will “jam,” forming a kind of dam, thus preventing the logs from moving downstream. In a log jam, there is usually a “key log,” a log that, if removed, will impact all the others, clearing the jam. You might say that the “key log” is the strategic log.

I believe we see God at work strategically in the Book of Acts moving “key logs” so that others were greatly impacted. God frequently multiplies the impact of the gospel by raising up or making use of strategic people. We have seen several strategic people in the last few chapters of Acts (chapters 6-8 in particular). God raised up two men – Stephen and Philip – from among the seven “**deacons**” who were appointed to oversee the care of the widows in Jerusalem. Stephen played a key role in the proclamation of the gospel, both by his preaching, and by his martyrdom. Philip also played a crucial role in evangelizing Samaria, as well as in pointing the Ethiopian eunuch to Jesus. The Ethiopian eunuch must have played a strategic role in taking the gospel to Ethiopia. God placed him in a very influential position, and this would have made him a strategic person in the spread of the gospel in his country. God also used Simon as a “key log” or strategic person. Because he had a very large following, his decision to follow Jesus must have caused others to listen to Philip’s preaching with interest. Saul is perhaps the most strategic person of all. His conversion is the watershed of Gentile evangelism in the Book of Acts.

What we have said above has a great deal to do with evangelism. First of all, it should impact our prayer life. We ought to be encouraged to pray for the salvation of the lost. We should even be encouraged to pray that God would save strategic individuals, so that their conversion and faith would impact large groups of people. Our church has partnered with the Church of the Open Door in California to pray for the salvation of key, strategic people who will impact many others, and perhaps bring about a great revival in our nation and abroad.

Twice in recent years, we have asked Colin McDougall from the Church of the Open Door to come to our church and speak on the topics of discipleship and prayer. One of the many things I have learned from Colin is that we should pray much more that God would prepare the hearts of lost sinners, and then bring them to us (or us to them). Colin has found that God has brought people to him whose hearts have been prepared for the gospel. In the Book of Acts, Luke reveals how God has prepared men and women to receive the gospel. Let us be encouraged to pray more in this regard – pray that God would open the hearts of men and women, and then lead us to them, or them to us, with the good news of the gospel.

As I was thinking about our text, it occurred to me that Simon’s sin is one that can be a temptation for any Christian. Simon sought to prostitute the grace of God, so that it served his personal interests. He wanted to “broker” God’s grace, buying the power to bestow the Spirit and (undoubtedly) selling the gift of the Spirit for personal gain. This is a most serious matter, as we should be able to discern from the severity of Peter’s rebuke.

Simon’s sin may take a slightly different form in our lives, but in essence, it is the same. God has given every Christian at least one spiritual gift so that we may edify (or build up) the body of Christ ([Romans 12:3-8](javascript:%7b%7d); [1 Corinthians 12](javascript:%7b%7d); [Ephesians 4:11-13](javascript:%7b%7d); [1 Peter 4:10-11](javascript:%7b%7d)). Our gifts are not given so much for our own personal benefit (though we do benefit from them) as they are for the building up of the body of Christ ([Ephesians 4:11-13](javascript:%7b%7d); [1 Corinthians 12:7; 14:12, 26](javascript:%7b%7d)). Salvation is by grace, apart from human merit or contribution. How dare anyone seek to pervert or prostitute God’s grace for personal gain! And that gain is not always monetary. It may be that we misappropriate the grace of God for the praise of men and ego satisfaction. *Let us beware of misappropriating those manifestations of divine grace, for purposes other than edifying men and glorifying God.* Here is a sin of which we are all capable, and of which most of us are, at one time or another, guilty.

How different Simon was from Saul – soon to be the Apostle Paul. After believing in Jesus, Simon sought to “use” God to his own advantage; Saul, on the other hand, was eager to be used by God, for the spread of the gospel. When Simon believed in God, he did not seem to grasp that he had died in Christ, and that his life as a believer was to be entirely new. That is something that Saul quickly grasped, and later taught:

I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So the life I now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me ([Galatians 2:20](javascript:%7b%7d)).

17 So I say this, and insist in the Lord, that you no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. 18 They are darkened in their understanding, being alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardness of their hearts. 19 Because they are callous, they have given themselves over to indecency for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. 20 But you did not learn about Christ like this, 21 if indeed you heard about him and were taught in him, just as the truth is in Jesus. 22 You were taught with reference to your former way of life to lay aside the old man who is being corrupted in accordance with deceitful desires, 23 to be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and to put on the new man who has been created in God’s image – in righteousness and holiness that comes from truth ([Ephesians 4:17-24](javascript:%7b%7d)).

The radical change that salvation is designed to produce is symbolized in Christian baptism. When we were joined with Christ by faith, we were joined to Him in His death to sin, and in His resurrection to newness of life. And thus we dare not revert back to our former attitudes, motivations, and actions:

3 Or do you not know that as many as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 Therefore we have been buried with him through baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too may live a new life. 5 For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, we will certainly also be united in the likeness of his resurrection. 6 We know that our old man was crucified with him so that the body of sin would no longer dominate us, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. 7 (For someone who has died has been freed from sin.) 8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9 We know that since Christ has been raised from the dead, he is never going to die again; death no longer has mastery over him. 10 For the death he died, he died to sin once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God. 11 So you too consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus ([Romans 6:3-11](javascript:%7b%7d)).

God used a Simon and an unbelieving Saul, but how much better to be used like Philip, who obediently followed the leading of the Holy Spirit, and willingly bore testimony to the Lord Jesus. He knew the Scriptures so well he could take up from the very text the eunuch was reading, and beginning there, proclaim the Lord Jesus. May we be that kind of instrument in God’s hands, to the salvation of the lost and to the glory of God.

[1](https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40" \l "P13_4974) Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the NET Bible. The NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION, also known as THE NET BIBLE, is a completely new translation of the Bible, not a revision or an update of a previous English version. It was completed by more than twenty biblical scholars who worked directly from the best currently available Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts. The translation project originally started as an attempt to provide an electronic version of a modern translation for electronic distribution over the Internet and on CD (compact disk). Anyone anywhere in the world with an Internet connection will be able to use and print out the NET Bible without cost for personal study. In addition, anyone who wants to share the Bible with others can print unlimited copies and give them away free to others. It is available on the Internet at: [www.netbible.org](http://www.netbible.org).

[2](https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40" \l "P15_5878) Copyright © 2006 by Community Bible Chapel, 418 E. Main Street, Richardson, TX 75081. This is the edited manuscript of Lesson 13 in the *Studies in the Book of Acts* series prepared by Robert L. Deffinbaugh on February 5, 2006. Anyone is at liberty to use this lesson for educational purposes only, with or without credit. The Chapel believes the material presented herein to be true to the teaching of Scripture, and desires to further, not restrict, its potential use as an aid in the study of God’s Word. The publication of this material is a grace ministry of Community Bible Chapel.

[3](https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40" \l "P23_9164) This term “**scatter**” is used only by Luke and is found only in [Acts 8:1, 4](javascript:%7b%7d) and 11:19. As some commentators have noted, it is a word used for the scattering of seed, an apt way to describe the dispersion of the church and the resulting spread of the gospel.

[4](https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40" \l "P43_16270) The Greek manuscripts differ as to whether the definite article (“the”) is present before Samaria. Thus, some translations render, “**a city of Samaria**,” while others render it, “**the city of Samaria**.” Obviously, the translators of the NET Bible concluded that the definite article should be included, and they rendered it in such a way as to convey the idea that this particular city was “the main city of Samaria.”

[5](https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40" \l "P68_30459) Stephen referred to the idolatry of Israel in his sermon, when he cited [Amos 5:26-27](javascript:%7b%7d) ([Acts 7:43](javascript:%7b%7d)).

[6](https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40" \l "P69_30769) This is essentially what they did with the golden calf (see [Exodus 32:1-8](javascript:%7b%7d)).

[7](https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40" \l "P81_34625) Their conversion was the sovereign, saving work of God, and God used Simon’s conversion as one of many means He used to point others to Jesus.

[8](https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40" \l "P85_37476) In [Acts 21:8](javascript:%7b%7d), he is called “**Philip the evangelist**.”

[9](https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40" \l "P90_39403) The expression, to open one’s mouth (and then to speak), is not unique to this text. We find it in [Matthew 5:2](javascript:%7b%7d), where Jesus began to teach the Sermon on the Mount. I cannot help but note the close proximity of this statement in [Acts 8:35](javascript:%7b%7d) to the statement from [Isaiah 53:7](javascript:%7b%7d), cited in [Acts 8:32](javascript:%7b%7d): “**. . . so he did not open his mouth**.” Jesus was silent at His death (see also [1 Peter 2:22-23](javascript:%7b%7d)), and so it is Philip who speaks to explain Messiah’s death and resurrection, and the salvation it achieved. We, too, are to open our mouths and speak of Him who suffered silently (see [Colossians 4:6](javascript:%7b%7d); [1 Peter 3:15](javascript:%7b%7d)).

[10](https://bible.org/seriespage/13-people-god-uses-acts-81-40" \l "P103_46802) I am not saying that God cannot or will not use signs and wonders in this age if He sovereignly chooses to do so; I am saying that we dare not insist that He must do so.

HOPE FOR THE CITY: THE GOSPEL, HOPE, AND THE WORLD

[ DR. TIMOTHY KELLER | Sermon transcript, 15 November 2009]

Acts 8:1–8 —   
*And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.*

*On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deep­ly for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.*

*Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. So there was great joy in that city.*

Redeemer’s vision, or mission, can be summarized in three words: gospel, city, movement. The gospel changes everything; serving in the city is the very best way to minister the gospel; and we don’t want to be just a church, just an institution, but a movement—a dynamic movement of many churches and ministries throughout the city.

Therefore, this passage is fitting and apt because Acts 8—this case study of Philip the evangelist going into the city of Samaria and doing ministry there—shows us all three things. It shows us what it means to be a movement, what it means to effectively minister in a city, and how to do that by living out the pattern of the gospel in our lives.

A MOVEMENT

We see what it means to be a movement in verses 1 to 4. Verse 1 says, “Saul was there, giving approval to his death.” This is the very end of the story in chapter 7, where we learn about Stephen, who was the first Christian martyr. Stephen was executed, stoned to death, for preaching the gospel. In verse 1 we see that Saul (Saint Paul—later on he would be converted) was there. Perhaps there was something about what he saw in Stephen, that though he was there passively approving, though he didn’t throw any stones, he saw something in Stephen that terrified him, radicalized him, and alarmed him. In any case, we read in verse 3 that after this event Saul began to be the active leader of a persecution. He was trying to destroy the church.

And, as a result, even though verse 1 says the apostles stayed in Jerusalem (they sort of went underground), everyone else—all the lay people—had to flee for their lives, and they were scattered. But the effect of the persecution was actually to strengthen the church—to spread the church, and to spread the gospel—because verse 4 says, “Those who had been scattered [all lay people] preached the word wherever they went.” The word “preached” is not the word you and I think of—we think of somebody publicly speaking to a group. But this word is actually the word “evangelize,” and what we are told is everybody evangelized.

Here is what happened. At the church in Jerusalem there was great preaching, and it probably grew because people brought their friends to hear the great preaching. But then the persecution happened, and they were pushed out. We are told that they took what they had learned from their teachers and preachers and they

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began to gossip the gospel, share the gospel, and counsel their friends with the gospel. They began to evangelize. Everybody did. They took what they had and they began to do it themselves.

The church is not supposed to be a body of people with a small number of providers—me, other ministers— and everybody else just coming and being customers. God used the persecution to turn the church into an entire community of providers so everybody was in mission together—absolutely everybody. Everybody was evangelizing—everybody was embodying the gospel, sharing the gospel, teaching the gospel, gossiping the gospel from person to person.

You see this all through the Bible. In Genesis 12, God comes to Abraham and says, “Abraham, I want to bless you. I want to come near to you. I want to bring you in close to me. I want to be intimate with you. I want to give you my love.” Wow! That’s what we want! But then he says in the same sentence, “I want to bless you, that you may be a blessing.”

God never calls you radically in without sending you radically out. He never calls you in and blesses you and fills your heart with love except to make you to be a blessing, to send you out to others (cf. Psalm 67:1–7). That is the reason why he says to Abraham, “I am going to really bless you. Now get out!” Take a look at Genesis 12. God says, “I am going to bless you. I am going to love you—now get out! Get out of Ur. Get out of your country. Get out of your culture. Get out of your comfort zone.” That’s the paradigm.

I want you to see something else. This is what one commentator on the book of Acts says about God using the persecution to send out the people so that everyone became a person in mission: It was not because of some mission plan that was approved and put into action by the leaders of the church that this great expan­sion happened. It was ordinary believers taking the opportunity to share the message wherever they went. The apostles became “the stabilizing, verifying, and unifying element in a mission that moves to new areas and groups without their planning or control.”1

Now that is a movement. In a bureaucracy, people at the top completely control everything. But in a movement, where everybody owns the mission, everybody is participating, even though you still need leaders. The apostles were “stabilizing, verifying, and unifying”—and yet there was a spontaneity about the church. All kinds of new initiatives bubbled up all over the place. The apostles didn’t send Philip to Samaria—he went. What happened is God used the persecution to turn his church into a movement, a movement in which everybody is in mission. Everybody is initiating.

That is actually a big part of what God is calling our church to be. By the way, I would say that most of the time—and we are going to talk about this as we go on here—for most churches and Christian communities that get renewed and turned from a kind of fat and happy institution into a dynamic movement in which everybody owns the vision, it usually happens through trouble, through persecution, or through something very bad. It is rare for a community to voluntarily seek it. And this voluntary venture is what we are trying to do at Redeemer over the next ten years. So, first of all, we learn here about being a movement.

MINISTERING IN THE CITY

The second thing we learn here is about the importance and the nature of city ministry (or urban ministry).

THE IMPORTANCE OF URBAN MINISTRY

Notice that everybody is scattered: verse 1, they were scattered; verse 4, they were scattered. That is significant in the Bible, because when the people of God are scattered, or when they are dispersed, urban ministry becomes very important.

1. Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation,* First Paperback Ed. Vol. 2. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 2:102.redeemercitytocity.com | The Gospel, Hope, and the World—Hope for the City 3

In the Old Testament, when the Babylonians conquered Judah, what we see is similar to what we have here in Acts 8. The Jews were scattered away from Jerusalem, and they come to a pagan city, Babylon, which was just as filled with people they didn’t like as Samaria was. (We will get to why the Jews and the Samaritans didn’t get along.) But the Jews—you can read about this in Jeremiah 29—were exiled away from Jerusalem, and they were put into a big, pagan city, Babylon. And then God told them, counterintuitively, to seek the joy of the city. He told the Jews, “I want you to seek the peace and prosperity and shalom of Babylon. Pray for it, for if it prospers, you will prosper” (Jeremiah 29:7). Your community will prosper if you pour yourself out in deeds of service and seek the prosperity and the peace of the city where you are.

It’s actually common sense. God is saying to us the same thing he said to the Jews: “If you love the city—if you pour yourself out for the city, if you seek the good of the city—how much of a better witness could there be to show the city that your god is God? If you want your community and your faith to grow, then care about the city.”

Urban ministry was crucial when the Jews were exiled, and in the New Testament it becomes crucial to the Christians being scattered. In fact, the whole book of Acts is all about Christians in cities. Do you know that almost everything that happens in the book of Acts happens in a city? The entire early church’s history unfolds in cities. Virtually every Christian you meet in the New Testament is a city dweller, and when Paul wanted to reach a province or a nation, he went to the biggest city in that nation and started churches there. Do you know why?

First of all, the best way to reach the nations is to reach the city. Some years ago I heard a lecturer say that if Paul really wanted to reach the nations, he could have gone into a particular nation and learned their language and learned their culture (and it is very hard to learn a new language and new culture) and minister there for ten years. And then he could have gone to another nation and learned the culture there and the language there, and ministered for another ten years. And that might have killed him, but if he was still alive, he could have tried it a third time, and learned a third language and a third culture and ministered to a third nation. And by that time, he would be dead.

Or, he could go to a city—go to Antioch, go to Rome—and in every city there are dozens and dozens of ethnic groups and nationalities and people groups, and they are all working in the lingua franca of the city. And then all Paul had to do—and this is what he did—was go to the cities and minister to the cities, and automatically the gospel got into the lifeblood of dozens and dozens of national groups, and it spread to the nations. You go to the city to reach the nations.

Secondly, you go to the city to reach the culture. If you go to a village, you might win a lawyer or you might win an artist—but if you go to the city, that is how you have an impact on the art world, and that is how you have an impact on the legal profession. And because Christians were inordinately focused on cities all during the first two or three centuries of their history, by the year 300 A.D. over half the populations of the Greco-Roman cities were Christian, but the countryside was pagan.

In fact, do you know where that word pagan comes from? It is a Greek word that means a “man of the country” or a “farmer.” See, the farmers, the people in the country, were pagans, and the people in the cities were Christians. But as the city goes—whatever has captured the city—that is where the culture is going. That is the reason the brutal, old pagan culture was displaced by Christianity, because people went to the cities. Do you see the importance of city ministry?

Let me say this very clearly. The Bible says—Jesus says—to take the gospel to every creature. That means you have to have Christians everywhere there are people. You have to have churches everywhere there are people. Jesus is saying you need Christians in every place, and there is no warrant for saying all Christians have to live in a city.

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But I want you to keep something in mind. Over at least the next 150 years, massive numbers of people will be moving into the great cities. For example, 150 years ago in Europe, the rural areas got to their “carrying capac­ity.” A family had six or seven children or so, and there was no more land, and since only one or two kids could get the farm, people began streaming into the cities to get jobs. As a result, the first great megacities of the world were the European cities. They became huge.

The same thing is happening now in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. What is happening now is the cities of most of the world are growing in size enormously. Somebody has said that basically there is a new Bangkok, as it were, formed every three months. That means eight or nine million people are moving into cities just about every three months.2 Over the next 150 years, millions of people are going to be moving into cities, which means in most of the world, the cities are growing in size. And in all of the world, because of tech-nologies, cities are growing in influence.

Therefore, for at least the next 100, 150, 200 years, most human beings are going to be living in cities, and the church does not know much about ministering in cities. What does that mean? It means we have got to be there. We have got to go there. It means we have got to be good at urban ministry. It is incredibly important.

THE NATURE OF URBAN MINISTRY

We also see in verses 5 to 8 what we need to be effective at urban ministry. There are three marks. Do you know what they are? The three marks of effective ministry are word, deed, and racial reconciliation.

**Word ministry**

Look at verse 5: “Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there.” That is word ministry. The word “proclaim” is what you think of; it is the word for “preach.” It is the word for public proclamation, public teaching of the Bible.

Except notice it says that he preached the Christ. He knew what the Bible is about. The Bible is not just about various principles and things you have to believe or do in order to be blessed by God. Oh no! The Bible is about Jesus. It is about Jesus Christ, and how he came to earth to rescue us and to save us by his grace. We see that Philip did not just show up in town and do good deeds. He preached the Word. He called people to repentance. He showed people the life-transforming message of the gospel.

**Deed ministry**

But the second thing is deed. Verse 7 says, “Evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed.” Look at that. People were delivered spiritually from interior evil, but, on the other hand, it says paralytics and cripples were healed, which means people were getting help for their physical needs. Don’t be distracted by the fact that this is miraculous, because it is not the only way to give people help for their physical needs. In fact, in Acts 4:32–35, you see a place where it says that the early Christian community shared everything they had, so there was no poor person among them.

All of Jerusalem saw the Christians taking care of people in need, helping them with their physical needs, and then it says, as a result, the apostles’ preaching was received with great power. It makes perfect sense. It even says so in verse 6: “When the crowds…saw the…signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said.” Or, in short, people will listen to our words if they see our deeds. If they see us loving the city—if they see us meeting people’s needs, if they see us caring about the city—they are going to listen to the word. It has got to be word and it has got to be deed.

**Racial reconciliation**

The third mark of dynamic, effective urban ministry is racial reconciliation. You say, “Where does it say anything about racial reconciliation?” That is one of the things that is so remarkable about the entire chapter.

2. See “The Brown Revolution,” *The Economist*, May 9, 2002.redeemercitytocity.com | The Gospel, Hope, and the World—Hope for the City 5

The Samaritans and the Jews utterly hated each other. There was tremendous racial animosity between the Samaritans and the Jews. One of the most amazing passages in the Bible is verse 5, because Philip is so unlike Jonah. Jonah? Yes, Jonah.

The book of Jonah is about God calling a Jewish prophet to go and preach to Nineveh, to the Assyrians. There was great racial animosity between the Jews and the Assyrians. They were mortal enemies. God says to Jonah, “I want you to go and preach to your mortal enemies. I want you to call them to repentance.” (See Jonah 1:1–2.) You probably remember one thing about the book of Jonah, but there were actually two things that happened. One thing was Jonah tried to run away. And God had to send a storm, and Jonah is eaten by a fish and regurgitated—the only regurgitated prophet we have! You have probably heard that part of the story, but the part you probably haven’t heard about is Jonah then goes to Nineveh and he preaches to these people that he hates, and unfortunately for him, they repent. He is furious because he wanted to see God “nuke” them. The book ends with him still furious.

Listen, whatever culture you grew up in, whatever people group you grew up in, your people group has taught you to look down on some other people group and say, “Oh those people.” God is trying to overcome the Jewish prophet’s antipathy to this other racial group, and at the very end of the book, he is still trying. It just hasn’t worked.

But here is Philip in Acts 8, and he just goes. He is a Jewish evangelist, a Jewish Christian, and he goes to Samaria. No fish. He is not swallowed or regurgitated—he just goes. Why? Do you realize how amazing this is?

The gospel works on the pride of our heart and the inferiority of our heart. My experience of tension between racial groups is there is a combination of superiority and inferiority going on. Until the gospel changes our hearts, we all struggle with inferiority, so what we do is we try to say our culture is superior. Our people are superior, not those people over there. We laugh at those people over there, and that creates this tension.

But what the gospel does is it works on both your superiority and your inferiority. It says you are a sinner, absolutely lost, and you can only be saved by sheer grace. There is nothing you can do about it. That destroys your superiority. But it also says the Son of God loved you so much that he was willing to come and give himself for you. That destroys your inferiority. And when your superiority is knocked down, and your inferiority is filled in and lifted up, you can reach out.

It is astounding but crucial for the Christian church, especially in cities where there is so much multi-ethnicity, to show the rest of the world how the gospel does destroy your superiority and your inferiority, and therefore brings people together who outside in the rest of the world would not be able to be together. The gospel makes people friends who out in the rest of the world would never be friends.

Do you know how it begins? It begins very simply. You have to use the gospel on your heart. You have to look at your own superiority and inferiority, work on it, and then when you come into the church, be aware of the fact that you tend to gravitate to people like yourself. Our default mode is to be just like the world told us to be: “Go after people like you. Hang out with people like you.” You have to catch yourself, and you have to start to reach across the barrier and use the gospel and make friends with a brother or sister who is not like you. That is how it starts. And unless we are able to show the world people getting along in here that can’t get along out there, then we really haven’t applied the gospel to ourselves.

Therefore, the marks of effective urban ministry are word, deed, and racial reconciliation, which change the world because they change the city.

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THE PATTERN OF THE GOSPEL IN OUR LIVES

Lastly, the text shows us how to be a movement and how to minister in the city by living out of a pattern of the gospel.

Do you know where the pattern of the gospel is? It is the whole chapter. It is something I only realized recently. Look at all this life and joy in Samaria—urban Samaria. It is amazing. Where did the life and joy come from? The life and the joy of verses 5 to 8 follow the death and the misery of verses 1 to 4.

Look at all the misery in verses 1 to 4. There is death. There is destruction. Verse 2 says, “Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him,” and the word there means “agonizing grief.” There is death, destruction, and agonizing grief, and then in verses 5 to 8, there is life and joy. Misery and death—joy and life. But here is what I want you to see. The joy and life don’t come in spite of the misery and death—they come through it. The joy and the life come because of the misery and the death. The death has caused resurrection.

How does this work? The pattern here is a gospel pattern. Here is the irony: Saul sought the destruction of the church, and what did it lead to? The expansion of the church. Saul sought to scatter the church, but all it did was to lead to more gathering. He tried to kill it—it led to more life. If you try to put the church to death, it leads to resurrection.

If you go to back to chapter 7 and read about Stephen, you see how it happened. When Stephen was put up in front of a kangaroo court, on trial for his life, was he scared? Maybe. But was he angry? Did he lash out at them? Did he call them names? No. We are told that his face was like the face of an angel. He had joy. He had radiance. As they were killing him, he said, “Lord, forgive them. They don’t know what they are doing” (v. 60).

And because he died like that, it electrified the church. In other words, he accepted his suffering; he accepted his death and died nobly. He died faithful to God and faithful to his friends. And, as a result, that particular kind of death led to resurrection. It led to more life. He died that others might live. The Samaritans found new life because he died. Do you see a pattern there?

This pattern has happened constantly in the history of the church—that greater persecution and violence toward Christians and greater oppression and trampling does not ever lead to violence in return. It leads to greater love. It leads to greater joy.

The best example of Acts 8 that we have today is actually what happened in China in the twentieth century. After World War II, when the Communist government took over, they threw all the Western missionaries out and they killed a lot of the Chinese pastors. They threw out the Western missionaries and said that was the end of Christianity in China. But do you know what happened? Ironically, it is the very same thing that happened here in Acts 8, because the Chinese church had become too dependent on the Western missionaries. They were the providers, and the churches were the customers; the missionaries brought in the money, and they had their fingers on the controls. But when the Communist government expelled the Western missionaries and began to persecute the church, it turned them all into people of mission. It turned them all into providers. It turned them into people that preached the Word and evangelized everywhere they went. It made the church indigenous, and the church just exploded in growth.

In fact, you see it over and over again. You try to kill the church—you try to persecute the church; you try to stamp it out—but if you use violence on the church, it only makes it grow. And the response is not growth in violence; the church doesn’t grow like that. It grows in love.

The persecuted Chinese church today (after having grown at least 50-fold over the fifty years after the expulsion of the Western missionaries) is only 5–7% of the population, but when the great earthquakes hit

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the Sichuan Province of China in 2008 and 68,000 people died, one million Chinese people volunteered and came and did relief work. And even though the Christians were only 5–7% of the population, probably up to half of all of the volunteers were believers—Christians. Because the more you kill Christians, the more you oppress them—as Tertullian said, “The blood of the martyrs is seed”—the better the church gets. The livelier the church gets. The more death, the more resurrection. The more destruction, the more expansion. The more scattering, the more gathering.

This has been true for two thousand years. Why would that be? How could it be? You know, there are an awful lot of people, groups, and associations that when you start to oppress them, they fight back. They get guns. They shoot you. Why are Christians different?

It is because of the gospel. What is the gospel? The gospel is Jesus. Why was Stephen able to take the condemnation of a kangaroo court with radiance? Why was Stephen able to give his life so that Samaria would live? The answer is because he was literally looking at someone. Just before he died, he says, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” (Acts 7:56) He was looking at someone, who also when he died said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34) He was looking at someone who didn’t just get the wrath of a kangaroo court, but the wrath of cosmic justice on all human evil.

Jesus Christ took all of our punishment for our sins. And Jesus didn’t just die so that Samaria would live—he died that the world would live. And because Stephen was looking at Jesus doing that, he was able to take his suffering with poise. He was able to take it with faithfulness. He was able to take it with joy, and his death led to resurrection.

By the way, Jesus’ death changed Stephen so that he was able to die in order that others may live. That can happen to you, too. Now, I am not suggesting, though it might happen, that you be martyrs. Here is what I am suggesting. It is the principle of the thing.

If you give your finances with radical, promiscuous generosity for the needs of the city—if you give like crazy out of your finances—that is a kind of death. Do you know why? You are dying to all kinds of stuff you could have afforded, all kinds of fun things you could have done if you hadn’t given to others. But if you die—if you experience that death, the death of radical financial generosity—there will be joy in the city. Death will lead to resurrection.

Or, what if you just stick your neck out and say, “I want to identify as a Christian in New York City.” I don’t mean be obnoxious about it. I just mean be willing to let people know you are a Christian. If you do that, there will be some death, oh yes—some people will walk away. Some people might avoid you. You might miss out on a job or get passed over for a promotion. You are experiencing a death, but if you are willing to open up to other people about your faith, that death will lead to life for others. It will lead to resurrection.

If you pour yourself out for others, the way Jesus literally poured his life out for you, it will lead to joy in the city. That is the principle. That is the pattern of the gospel.

His death leads to your life. His death has led to your eternal life, and now, seeing what he has done for you, it will enable you to pour your life out for others, and there will be joy in the city. And if there is joy in the city because you are living out of the pattern of the gospel in your life, it will change the world. Let’s be that kind of movement.

Let’s pray.

Our Father, we thank you that you have given us this vision. You have given us this model. You have given us this pattern and this power. And now we ask that we would realize that, here, as a church. Lord, we ask this not just for Redeemer, but for all the churches of the city, and not just for the churches of New York City but the churches of the cities of the world. Help us to become a movement, to minister effectively in cities out of the gospel—its power and its pattern. We ask this in the name of the one who came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. It is in his name we pray, Amen.

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# Understandest Thou What Thou Readest? A Sermon [(No. 1792)](http://www.romans45.org/spurgeon/index/c30.htm) Delivered on Lord's-Day Evening, May 11th, 1884, by C. H. SPURGEON, at [*http://www.romans45.org/spurgeon/sermons/1792.htm*](http://www.romans45.org/spurgeon/sermons/1792.htm)

*"And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest? 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. 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: In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth."—*Acts 8:30-33.

Logo

Description automatically generatedOW THIS NEGRO CHAMBERLAIN of the Queen of Ethiopia came to be a proselyte we do not know. The book which he was so fond of reading may have been the means of leading him to worship the God of Abraham, certainly it has answered that purpose thousands of times. At any rate, he followed the light he had, and though he had not yet come to the full glory of Christianity, it was more than probable that he would do so, because he was evidently prepared to follow truth wherever her flaming torch should lead the way. Oh, that there were more candour among men in these latter days, and less of the prejudice which puts scales upon the eyes of the mind!  
Be true to truth as it comes to you. If God gives you only common candle-light, make good use of it; and he will trim your lamp till it shineth like the sevenfold golden light of his holy place. Those who are willing to see God by the moon of nature shall soon be illuminated by the sun of revelation. Instead of complaining that you have no more light, make good use of what you have. Many groan over their inabilities, and yet they have never gone to the end of their abilities: this is sheer hypocrisy.  
Having become a proselyte to the faith of Israel, the eunuch made a long and perilous journey to Jerusalem. After he had enjoyed the solemn feast he returned; and while he traveled along, he read the word of God. The book of the prophet Isaiah was the portion chosen or his meditation. Does it not strike you as being remarkable that he should be reading at that moment the best text that Philip could have selected? He had reached a portion of Scripture from which, without the slightest digression, the evangelist preached unto him Jesus as the slain lamb, the willing sacrifice for guilty men. The like conjunction of providence and the Holy Spirit constantly occurs in conversions. What the man has read in the book, the preacher is often moved by the Spirit of God to declare from the pulpit, for God has servants everywhere, and his secret directions are given out, so that all these servants, though they are little aware of it, are led to work together for the same predestined end. How often have the talks of young men by the wayside been reproduced by the preacher, and such singular coincidences have struck their attention, and been the means of impressing their hearts! God grant there may be something of that kind to-night—I know there will be. Into this hall years ago there strayed a wild young man; he heard me preach, he believed in Jesus, and he has long been an honored deacon of a suburban church. Are there not other men here to whom the like salvation shall come?  
This eminent nobleman is reading. That is a commendable occupation: reading is in itself somewhat of a hopeful sign. In these days we need hardly exhort young men to read. "Give attendance to reading," said the wise apostle Paul, and that was excellent advice for Timothy. Let all Christian men be reading men. But, then, Philips question contains these words, "what thou readest," and that suggests a necessary enquiry. I am afraid much that is read nowadays had far better be left unread. Multitudes of books are fruits of an accursed tree—the tree of evil knowledge, which is watered by the rivers of perdition. The fruits of this upas-tree will yield no benefit to the minds that feed thereon, but much of solemn damage; by perverting the judgment, or polluting the imagination. Souls have been ruined to all eternity by reading a vile book. Count it no trifle to have heard bad language; but count it a more serious evil to have read a bad book which has wounded your soul, and left a scar upon your conscience. The writer of an evil book is a deliberate poisoner, secretly pouring death into the wells from which men drink. The printers and publishers of such works are accomplices in the crime. Young men, you will read—who among us would wish you to do otherwise?—but take heed what you read! As one who has read more greedily than most men all sorts of books, I bear my testimony that the best of reading is the reading of the best of books. The more we read the Bible and volumes that lead up to the understanding of it, the better for us. I do not like to see in a lending-library all the works of fiction needing to be bound two or three times over, while the books of sober fact and solid teaching, and the works that speak of eternal things, have never been read, since they have not even been cut. I fear that this is the general if not the universal rule. "Understandest thou what thou readest?" is a question I should hardly put until a man has made up his mind that he will not read mere rubbish and falsehood, but will with deep attention read that which is accurate, truthful, devout, and ennobling. Read; take heed what you read; and then seek to understand what you read.  
It was a very sharp-pointed question that Philip put to this gentleman. He made honest and earnest use of a rare opportunity for reaching one of the upper ten. We find it tolerably easy to put questions to a man who is poor, but how shall we approach the rich? We have sermons for the working-classes, and it would be a fair and useful thing to have sermons for the House of Peers, and evangelistic addresses for the Commons! Are there any bigger sinners anywhere than you might find in those two chambers? The rich are neither better nor worse than the poor: the various classes have bad and good in each of them, in much the same proportion. I am persuaded that there are noble lords and honorable gentlemen who would be all the better for a little teaching upon the things of the kingdom of God: for instance, it might do many of them good to hear a plain sermon from, "Ye must be born again." Why is it that we are so apt to be plain-spoken with working-men, and not with their employers? I admire Philip for his outspokenness to the royal treasurer. This gentleman keeps a carriage. Look at his retinue and his brave display! He is a very important personage, and yet Philip, who is nobody in particular, only a poor preacher of the Word, runs up to the chariot, and solemnly asks, "Understandest thou what thou readest?" Young men, never be irritated by plain questions from a servant of Christ, or else you will not be as noble as this Ethiopian chamberlain: and, young men, when you know the Lord, do not be ashamed yourselves to put important questions to other people. Bold enquiries often give less offense than the more politic and indirect address which timidity suggests. I fear the world can seldom charge the church with being too violent in its appeals. Look at what the ungodly will do to us. Where can you live in a street of London, especially in this part of the town, without having night made hideous with their loud licentious songs and shouts? They force upon us their irreligion: may we not introduce our religion in return? If we go up to a man straight away, and speak to him in the name of Christ, perhaps he will say, "You intrude." Well, we are not the only people that intrude, for many intrude their filthy tongues upon us as we go down the streets, and force their infidelity upon us in the daily prints. The world sets the fashion, and if we follow its customs it has no right to complain. When the wicked grow so delicate that they are afraid of hurting our feelings by their unbelieving speeches, we may take into consideration how we can go delicately also. Meanwhile, is there anything which a man of God has not a right to say if it be the truth, and if he be earnestly aiming at the salvation of his fellow-men?  
This was the question, *"Understandest thou what thou readest?"* Ah, my brothers, you and I have need to understand the Bible. I will suppose you read it—let me hope I am not mistaken; but when you read it, do labor, above all things, to understand it. The Book was written to be understood. It is a book which speaks to us about our lives (for the soul is the true life), and about the bliss eternal, and the way to win it. It must be so written as to be understood, since it were a mockery for God to give us a revelation which we could not comprehend. The Bible was meant to be understood, and it benefits us in proportion as we get at the meaning of it. The mere words of Scripture passing over the ear or before the eye, can do us little good. I heard a person say once, concerning a great doctrine which I hold to be very plainly taught in Scripture, that he had read the Bible through—I think he said six times—on his knees, but he could not find that doctrine. I replied, "Brother, that is an awkward position in which to read the Bible. I should have sat upon a chair, and studied the page in a natural and easy posture. Moreover, I should not have galloped through it at the rate at which you must have raced over the chapters. I should rather have read a little at a time, and tried to understand it."  
"Understandest thou what thou readest?" that is the question. "I read a chapter every morning," says one. Quite right; keep that up, but "Understandest thou what thou readest?" "Well, I learn the daily text." Yes, but "Understandest thou what thou readest?" That is the main point. The butterflies flit over the garden, and nothing comes of their flitting; but look at the bees, how they dive into the bells of the flowers, and come forth with their thighs laden with the pollen, and their stomachs filled with sweetest honey for their hives. This is the way to read the Bible: get into the flowers of Scripture, plunge into the inward meaning, and suck out that secret sweetness which the Lord has put there for your spiritual nourishment. A thoughtful book needs and deserves thoughtful reading. If it has taken its author a long time to write it, and he has written it with much consideration, it is due to him that you give his work a careful perusal. If the thoughts of men deserve this, what shall I say of the supreme thoughts of God which he has written for us in this Book? Let us bend ourselves to the Book; let us ask for increased capacity, and let us use what capacity we already possess to reach the inmost soul of the Word of God, that we may understand it, and be fed thereby. The Bible can be understood, I do assure you. I will not say that any man here understands all of it. I do not believe there is any man alive that does. I could not myself believe in it if I could understand it all—for I should imagine that it came from my equal, and not from that supreme Master mind, whose thoughts must be above our thoughts, even as the heavens are above the earth. All that is right, all that is fundamental, all that is essential to our soul's eternal good, can be understood by the help of God if we desire to understand it. Digest the word, I pray you. Be prepared to answer this question, "Understandest thou what thou readest?" Desiring to press that matter upon you, I am going to speak upon three questions somewhat briefly. The first is, *What is most essential to be understood in this Book?* secondly, *What is the test of a man's understanding it?* and, lastly, *What can be done to obtain such a desirable understanding?*  
I. WHAT, THEN, IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING TO BE UNDERSTOOD IN THIS BOOK? I do verily believe that it is contained in the passage which the eunuch was reading. It is a very singular passage. A section of the Bible begins at Isaiah 53., and goes onward through several chapters. I will read you a verse or two out of that part which the eunuch would soon have read had he continued to peruse the words of the prophet. Already he had noted the words,—"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." There was something for him, for he had gone astray, and knew his lost estate. Go on to chapter 54., verse 3, and read this, "Thou shalt break forth on the right hand and on the left; and thy seed shall inherit the Gentiles, and make the desolate cities to be inhabited." He might have thought, "I am one of the Gentiles, and therefore I am of the nations that shall be possessed by the seed." When he reached the fifty-fifth chapter, how his eyes would sparkle as he began to read, "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters"! And this, "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near." Here, too, he would hear the voice of God inviting men to come to his Anointed, and he would mark that promise, "Behold, thou shalt call a nation that thou knowest not, and nations that knew not thee shall run unto thee because of the Lord thy God." He would rejoice to see that the Ethiopians were included in those who knew not the Christ, but should, nevertheless, run to him.  
I beg you to look at the fifty-sixth chapter and the third verse. I fancy the eunuch had aforetime read the portion; it must have been a favourite passage with him, for it runs thus: "Neither let the eunuch say, Behold, I am a dry tree. For thus said the Lord unto the ennuchs that keep my Sabbaths, and choose the things that please me, and take hold of my covenant; even unto them will I give in mine house, and within my walls, a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters." Was not that pointedly personal, and full of consolation? I do not wonder that he liked to be found reading near such a choice promise, wherein he saw the tender compassion of the Lord for beings who are usually despised.  
The passage from which Philip's text was taken contains the most essential thing for every young man to know. Let him know and understand the sixth verse of the fifty-third of Isaiah; it begins with "all" and ends with "all;" therefore carry it in your memories—*"All* we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way, and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us *all."* What is wanted is that we first understand that we have *all gone astray.* He who does not know that he has gone astray will not care for the Shepherd who comes to fetch him back again. A humbling, heart-breaking sense of our personal wanderings from the Lord is a main force by which the heavenly Father leads us to the Lord Jesus and his salvation. I want every young man here to know and understand the truth, that *salvation is the gift of divine mercy* to those who are guilty, and is never the reward of human merit. Christ did not come to save you because you are good, for you are not good; nor because you have merit, for you have no merit. He would not have come to save you if you had possessed merit. Why should he? There would have been no need. I hear the doctor's brougham rattling down the street at a great pace, and I wonder where he is going. It never occurs to me that he is rushing to call upon a hale and hearty man. I am persuaded that he is hastening to see one who is very ill, perhaps one in dying circumstances, otherwise he would not drive so fast. It is just so with Jesus Christ. When he is hurrying on the wings of the wind to rescue a child of man, I am sure that the soul he visits is sick with the malady of sin, and that the Physician is making haste because the disease is developing into corruption and death. He came not "to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

"Who rightly would his alms dispose  
Must give them to the poor;  
None but the wounded patient knows  
The comforts of a cure."

Jesus will not waste his grace on those who are already good. "He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away."  
Oh, that you would also understand the second half of Isaiah's verse, *"The Lord hath laid, on him the iniquity of us all"!* There is more philosophy in that statement than in all the teachings of Aristotle, there is more truth worth knowing in that one sentence than in all the books of the Alexandrian Library. The Lord Jehovah lifted up the sin of man, and deliberately laid it upon his dear Son. His Son, willingly bearing that load as our Substitute, went up to the tree, and there he bore what was due for all that weight of sin, even the penalty of darkness, desertion, and death. By bearing the chastisement he put away sin, and hurled it into his own sepulcher, wherein it is buried for ever. Now, every man who believes in Jesus may know that his sin was laid upon Christ, and borne by Christ, and put away by Christ. A thing cannot be in two places at one time. If my sin was laid on Christ, it is no longer laid on me. God cannot exact two penalties for the same offense: if he accepted Christ Jesus as my substitute, then he cannot punish me. God's justice cannot twice demand the penalty—

"First at my bleeding Surety's hand,  
And then again at mine."

Such an exaction would be a strange confusion and destruction of both love and justice. Such injustice can never be. This is how you are to get rid of your sin. *You* cannot bear it, but Christ bore it; you are to accept Christ as your Sin-bearer, and then you may know that your sins have gone, that the depths have covered them; that there is not one of them left. I sometimes think if men did but understand this they would be sure to accept the Lord Jesus. I heard of a minister in Edinburgh who went to visit one of his poor people. He heard that she was in deep poverty, and therefore he went to take her help. When he came to her house, he could not make anybody hear, though he knocked loud and long. Seeing her some time after, he said, "Janet, I knocked at your door with help for you, but you did not hear me." "What time did you come, Sir?" said she. "It was about twelve o'clock." "Oh," she said, "I did hear you, Sir, but I thought it was the man calling for the rent." Just so. Men do hear the calls of Christ, but they are wilfully deaf, because they think be wants them to do something. But he does not want anything of you; he wants you to receive what he has already done. He comes laden with mercy, with his hands full of blessing, and he knocks at your door: you have only to open it and he will enter in, and salvation will enter with him. Say, "Come in, thou Traveller unknown! What hast thou in thy hands? I gladly accept what thou dost bring." Will not some young man here, who has thought religion to be a hard exaction, change his mind, now that he understands that it is a bountiful boon? Salvation is a gift—a free gift of God. "Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely." The Savior lifts sin from men to himself, and then makes an end of that sin once for all by his death upon the cross. Oh, hear you this, ye guilty ones: there is fall salvation presented to you in the word of God—salvation from every sort of evil! You shall be helped to overcome every bad passion, to conquer every evil habit, to be masters of your own minds, and lords of your own spirits. The Lord Jesus Christ, if you accept him, will come into your heart, and turn out his enemy and yours, and he will reign in you from this time forth and for ever, until he has made you perfect, and fit to dwell with himself in glory. Oh, that you understood this vital point; "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all"!  
II. WHAT IS THE TEST OF A MAN'S UNDERSTAXDING HIS BIBLE, AND OF UNDERSTANDING THIS PASSAGE IN IT?  
I answer that the test of a man's understanding this important part of Scripture is that *Jesus Christ is everything to him:* for Philip, who did understand it, when he explained it, preached unto the eunuch Jesus and nothing else. I try with all my might to preach my Lord Jesus Christ, and I love to meet with people who delight in this theme. Certain critics call upon us to preach something fresh. This also will I do, for I will preach Jesus, and he is always fresh: there is nothing stale in him, he has for ever the dew of his youth.  
It may be said, "But new doctrines are brought out continually." Yes, but they grow stale in a month; they are a poor kind of Covent Garden stuff, and need to be carted away quickly, else they decay. I have lived to see a score or more sorts of modern theology; they all come and go, but Jesus Christ remains the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever.  
If you have Jesus Christ, you have everything—top, bottom, and middle as well. Have Christ and nothing else but Christ. You will not be in safety if you rest without having a firm hold of Jesus, the divine Savior. "Well," says one, "but what do you make of Socinians and Unitarians?" I come to the same conclusion about them as did an old Baptist minister, who was greatly grieved to see a Socinian chapel erected opposite his own. One of his deacons said, "This is a dreadful thing—this opposition shop that has been opened on the other side of the road!" "I don't call it opposition at all," said the minister. The deacon exclaimed, "Why, they are Unitarians; they don't preach the Godhead of Christ!" The old man said, "If you kept a baker's shop, and another man were to open an ironmongery business opposite you, that would not be opposition, for he would be in quite another line. Those who do not preach the deity of Christ are in an altogether different business. If you want ironmongery you may go to them, but if you want the bread of heaven you must look to the Lord Jesus, the Son of the Highest." So if you want to understand the Scripture, test yourself by this: Is Jesus Christ everything to you?

"You cannot be right in the rest  
Unless you think rightly of him."

You understand the Scripture if you make everything of the Lord Jesus Christ; if you believe on him with all your heart, and then yield yourselves up to him in his own way.  
*Every young man, when he believes in Jesus, should give himself to Jesus, heart and soul, for ever.* "That's the kind of young man for my money, for he is O and O." So spake a certain person, and when he was asked what that meant, he replied, "Out and out for Jesus Christ." Such a man is precious in these days; yes, precious as the gold of Ophir. Jesus was out and out for us, he loved us, and gave himself for us: there should be no half-heartedness in our dealings with him. If we have read Scripture aright, we have not received the kind of Christianity which sanctifies us on Sunday, but enables us to be dishonest throughout the week. True saints have a religion that has entered into their very blood, changing their nature, and permeating their being, so that it is part and parcel of themselves. Practical Christianity is the only real Christianity. If your religion can be laid aside I would advise you to get rid of it; for a real Christian could no more lay aside his godliness than he could unscrew his head.  
I like this eunuch for proposing that he should be baptized. He was not advised to do so, but he proposed it himself, and gave himself up to his Lord and Master to do the Lord's bidding at once, the providonce of God having provided water that he might there and then fulfill his Master's command. Young man, whichever way the Scripture bids you dedicate yourself to God, set to work about it, and let it be done at once. Find out what is the scriptural way, and then follow it without delay, surrendering yourself wholly to the Lord: you have not read the Scriptures with understanding unless you do that.  
The next thing is, if you have read the Scriptures with a clear understanding, *they have made you glad,* for this eunuch "went on his way rejoicing." The man who gets up from reading his Bible, and says, "I am a believer in Jesus; what a solemn thing it is!" and then goes forth with a pious resolution that he will make everybody as miserable as he can all the day long, wants converting again. The faith of the Scriptures leads joy by the hand, and chases away despair. When true religion coupes, its tendency is to make us rejoice in the Lord always; and though we are not as happy as we ought to be, that is not the fault of our faith, but of our unbelief. Fair flowers of Paradise spring up where Faith plants her feet; but thistles grow where doubt abides. Our indigestion, or some other malady may depress us; but faith should make our songs abound even while we are travelling through the wilderness. Joys unspeakable may be ours before we

"Reach the heavenly fields,  
Or walk the golden streets.'"

You have not read your Bible so as to understand it to the full, unless you have learned to be happy by a sweet resting in Jesus.  
I think you have not understood the Bible unless *it makes you care about the salvation of others;* for this Ethiopian nobleman, when he got home, I have no doubt, spread the gospel throughout his native land: he was, probably, the founder of the Abyssinian Church. If any young man reads this Book aright, he becomes large-hearted, he cannot hold his soul within the narrow bound of his ribs, but his great heart looks out to see where it can scatter benefits. If thou canst let another man be damned without an effort, I fear that such will be thine own end: if thou canst be quiet when thou believest thy brother is on the brink of eternal ruin, I fear thou art on the brink of ruin thyself. One of the holiest instincts born in a renewed man is that of longing to save others. Being saved, we wish to co-operate with the Savior in his gracious work. A missionary enthusiasm is the natural result of a clear perception of the true state of matters in reference to the world, which lieth in the wicked one. The heathen die without hope: shall it be always so? Will no young man rescue the perishing? I put it to you from the deeps of my soul, will you not cry, "Here am I, send me!"?  
You have read this Book so as to understand it, *if your message to others is what the message was to you*—Christ, Christ, Christ, Christ. You have nothing else to employ as the means of good, except the salvation of Jesus, and there is nothing else worth telling. I heard of a congregation the other day that was so very small that hardly any one came to listen to the preacher. Instead of blaming himself, and preaching better, the minister said he thought he was not doing much good by sermons and prayer-meetings, and therefore he would found a club, and if the fellows came in, and played draughts, that might do them good. What a lot of that sort of thing is now being tried! We are going to convert souls on a new system,—are we? Are we also to have a substitute for bread?—and healthier drink than pure water? We cannot save men by faith in Jesus Christ, and so it seems we are going to try new dodges of our own. We shall reap small, scant sheaves from such wretched seed. If you can do good anyhow, do good anyhow; but to hope ever to bring sinners to holiness and heaven by any teaching but that which begins and ends in Jesus Christ is a sheer delusion. None other name is given among men whereby they can be saved. If you have to deal with highly learned and educated people, nothing is so good for them as preaching Jesus Christ; and if the people be ignorant and degraded, nothing is better for them than the preaching of Jesus. A young man said to another the other day, "I am going down to preach at So-and-so, what sort of people are they there? What kind of doctrine will suit them?" Having heard of the question, I gave this advice,—"You preach Jesus Christ, and that will suit them, I am sure, if they are learned people it will suit them; if they are ignorant it will suit them—God blessing it." When the great Biblical critic, Bengel, was dying, he sent for a young theological student, to whom he said, "I am low in spirit; say something good to cheer me." "My dear Sir," said the student, "I am so insignificant a person, what can I say to a great man like yourself?" "But if you are a student of theology," said Bengel, "you ought to have a good word to say to a dying man; pray say it without fear." "Well, Sir," said he, "What can I say to you, but that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin?" Bengel said, "Give me your hand, young man; that is the very word I wanted." A simple gospel text is the word which every man needs who is in fear of divine wrath, and he may be sitting next to you at this moment, or he is in the same house of business with you, and needs that you should tell him about Christ. Do that, and bless his soul. May you all understand the Scriptures in this way, and may God make you a great blessing to those around you.  
III. Now in a few words I want to answer the question, WHAT CAN BE DONE TO OBTAIN SUCH A DESIRABLE UNDERSTANDING OF THE SCRIPTURES? "I read the Bible," says one, "and get a great deal puzzled over it." Let me advise that when you read a passage in the Scriptures which you do not understand, you should read it until you do. "I should have to read often." Well, that would not hurt you. "But suppose I never do understand it?" Keep on reading it all the same. "Can passages of Scripture which we do not understand do us any good when we read them?" Yes; they gradually filter into our souls: by long considering them we get light out of them. Here is a little boy whose father is an artisan, and uses a great many technical terms when talking about his work. The boy is apprenticed to the trade, and wants to know all about it, and therefore he listens to his father, and when the day is over he says to himself, "I heard my father say a great deal, but I do not understand much of it." "But you did understand a little of it?" "Oh, yes." To that little he is faithful, and day by day he adds to his store of information, learning more by the help of that which he already knows. He hears his father talk again the next day, and still he does not understand much; but at last, by hearing the terms often, and by meditating upon them, light breaks in, and at length he can talk like his father, using the same words with understanding. So I have found it. When I do not comprehend a chapter, I say,—This is probably comprehensible, I will therefore hear my great Father speak, even if I do not understand at first what he may say to me, and I will keep on hearing him until at last I grasp his meaning. I fear we do not understand some passages because we have not read them often enough, nor thought upon them with full concentration of mind. Once or twice they pass before the mind and produce no impression; let us observe them yet again, and then their effect will be deep and permanent. Do as the photographer does, when he allows an object to be long before the camera until he obtains a well-defined picture. Let your mind dwell on a passage till at last it has photographed itself upon your soul by the light of God.  
The next bit of advice I would give is, always read with a desire to understand: always have the crackers with you to crack the nuts, that you may feed upon their kernels. Some may say, when reading the Bible, "That may be a very blessed passage, but I don't in the least know what it means." Be not content to leave the text in that condition. Weep much because no man can open the book, and loose its seven seals. Pray over the words, and study them again and again, till at last you come at the essence of the text. Reading with that view, it is wonderful how soon you will obtain the understanding you seek after.  
Next, be sure to pray for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. If you want to understand a book, and you find difficulties in it, do as I have done on several occasions with my contemporaries—write and ask them what they mean by their language. I have in this way obtained much valuable information. Can we do that with the Bible? Assuredly we can if we know how to pray. The Author of the Bible is never more pleased than when we go directly to him to ask him what he means. He puts himself at the disposal of every earnest student to open up by means known to himself those Scriptures which he hath himself dictated. "I consulted a learned commentator," says one. Very well; at the same time, to go to a commentator upon a book is not half so certain a mode of procedure as to go to the author of the book. Seek instruction of the blessed Spirit by humble prayer.  
Remember that you can also go to the Maker of your mind, and he can open it to receive the truth. Your mind is out of order, and it is no wonder, considering its serious damage by the Fall, and the atmosphere of sin which surrounds it in this present evil world. My mind, I know, is very likely to be in a disorderly state; it has for fifty years been always at work, and I think it must by this time be like an old clock that has grown rusty or dusty. I find my brains want clearing out a bit; and I believe that this is the case with you young men, too. You are either very busy, or else very careless, and the dust of care or neglect spreads over your brain. Who can set the brain right? The Creator who made the brain. The Holy Spirit has a wonderful power in clearing the intellect. You shall study for a month and make no headway; but you shall pray to God about a spiritual truth, and it shall be clear to you in a minute. There are multitudes of instances in which men have turned dark problems over and over again in their minds, and have never solved them by their own mental efforts, but one flash of Divine light has made everything bright as noonday. Wait, then, upon the Author of the Book, and then wait upon the author of yourself, and say, "Lord, as thou openest the Scriptures, so open my understanding that I may perceive their meaning."  
I would earnestly entreat every man who desires to understand the Bible to consider at this moment the vital point of his natural condition, and the nay of salvation from it. You are lost, dear friend. If you are an unconverted man you are still lost, and you cannot save yourself; it is impossible that you should. You may have heard the story of that philosopher who was once on the roof of a house, when suddenly behind him came a strong man with a huge whip, and told him to jump down to the ground. Certain death would have been the result. The man was a lunatic. The philosopher perceived that terrible fact in a moment, and so he very wisely said, "Well, you see? any fool can jump down, the grand thing would be to jump up. Let us go down, and jump up." They went down, but they never jumped up, for the gentleman thus escaped. Are there not some here who are jumping down? some young men who are taking a desperate leap to one sin or another? Any fool can jump down; but if any of you are already down, I defy you to jump up again. No, you need a greater power than your own before you can ascend the heights of holiness. If you have tried to jump up, I know, young man, you have fallen back in despair. Easy is the descent to hell, the gravitation of our nature tends that way; but to retrace our steps, this is the work, this is the difficulty. Turn that over in your mind, and say, "If there be salvation to be had, since I cannot work out my own rescue without divine grace, I will trust in Jesus." Oh, that you would seek his grace at once!  
I tried to preach the gospel just now; let me again put it simply. A negro worded it thus, *"Christ die, me not die,"* and that is the gospel; Christ dies that you may not die. Only trust him, and you are saved.  
When you are about it, dear young friend, I beseech you to trust Christ out and out. A homely parable will illustrate what I mean. A father, it is said, had to go one night along the top of a rugged and very slippery precipice. His two boys were with him, and when he started, one boy said, "Father, I will take hold of your hand." He did so, and it seemed a very wise thing to do. The other boy said, "Father, take hold of my hand," and, as it turned out, that was a much more prudent course; for the first youngster clung to his father's hand until he grew weary, and when they were in a very frightful place he failed to hold on, and down he went, but the other trudged along right merrily, for he was not dependent upon his hold of his father's hand—all depended upon the father's hold of him. Now come, young man, and begin as you mean to go on. Put yourself right into the hand of the Lord Jesus for him to keep you. When I was a lad I heard a preacher say that Christ gave to his sheep eternal life, and that they should never perish, for he would keep them to the end. This charmed me. I longed to find this sure salvation. I thought within myself, "I know James So-and-so, and Tom So-and-so, who went up to London, and who were about a year older than I, and they, within half-a-dozen years, were as far gone in vice as well could be. They were better boys when they were at school than I was, and yet they went to the bad. I may go and do the same thing as they did unless I get this eternal salvation. I may lose my situation, or be found pilfering, or something of that sort, for I have as bad a heart as they have." I looked upon salvation as a spiritual insurance, which would guarantee my character. So I tried the promise and now, at the age of fifty, I place myself under the care of the Lord Jesus as I did at the age of fifteen; he has kept me to this day, and I believe he will never let me go, however long I may live. Oh, young man, give yourself up to that dear pierced hand wholly and heartily! Let your motto be, "Jesus only." Trust Christ a little, and yourself a little, and, like a man who plants one foot on the rock and the other on the quicksand, you will go down. Trust in him alone, and he will hold you fast. If Jesus does not save me, I shall be lost, for I cannot save myself. It is his business to save me, for both by name and office he is Jesus, the Savior; and I rest quite happily in him.  
When we meet in heaven we shall praise the Lord for making us understand what we read. God bless you all, for Christ's sake. Amen.

**Kistemaker’s commentary on Acts 8**

*c. With Peter and John*

*8:14–17*

Do the apostles go to Samaria to approve the work that Philip has done? Does Philip lack the gift of the Holy Spirit? Is there an inadequacy in establishing the Christian church in Samaria? We ask these questions in the context of the development of the church as Luke portrays this development in Acts.

Before his ascension, Jesus told the apostles to remain in Jerusalem and to await the coming of the Holy Spirit. When they received the power of the Holy Spirit, they began to be witnesses for Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the world (1:8).

The theme that Luke unfolds is one of ever-widening circles comparable to those created by a stone thrown into a placid pond. The Spirit is poured out on Jewish people in Jerusalem and the church there begins to develop. When Philip preaches in Samaria and Samaritans believe and are baptized, the apostles come from Jerusalem to welcome these believers into the Christian church. God binds Jewish Christians and Samaritan Christians together in one church. He breaks down the wall of separation that has existed between the Jew and the Samaritan. And he abolishes any animosity between these two groups (compare 11:17). He also causes the Holy Spirit to descend, so that the Samaritans experience their own Pentecost, so to speak, and Jew and Samaritan know that they are one in Christ.

**14. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them.**

The apostles in Jerusalem hear about the work Philip has performed in Samaria and now deliberate what to do. In harmony with Jesus’ command to be witnesses in Samaria, they commission Peter and John to travel to the city where Philip is preaching Christ’s gospel. They instruct Peter and John to be their official representatives to welcome the Samaritan believers into the Christian church. Incidentally, this is the last time Luke mentions John’s name in Acts. Also note that at one time, John and his brother James asked Jesus if they might call down fire from heaven to destroy the Samaritans (Luke 9:54).

Luke writes that the apostles heard that Samaria received God’s word. The word *Samaria* is a general term that signifies not the country as such but the Samaritans as a people. And the expression *the word of God,* which in Acts and the rest of the New Testament is similar to the phrases *the word of the Lord* or simply *the word,* is equivalent to the message and witness of Jesus embodied in the gospel of Christ.

**15. They went down there and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit,** **16. because the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen upon any of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.**

Peter and John leave Jerusalem (see v. 5) and travel to the town where Philip is preaching to and baptizing the Samaritans. When the apostles arrive, they pray for the Samaritans and ask God to send the Holy Spirit to these recent converts (compare 2:38; 10:44). Luke records that the Samaritans have not had the experience of the Holy Spirit falling upon them and that they are baptized not in the name of the Triune God but in the name of Jesus.

Is Philip, because he is an evangelist and not an apostle, unable to pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit? Is not the Spirit at work as Samaritans turn in faith to Christ? And why does Philip baptize only in the name of Jesus? I will try to answer these questions one by one.

First, did Philip have the ability to pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit? Certainly he had the ability, for he himself was full of the Spirit (6:3). However, God sent the apostles Peter and John to Samaria to signify that through the apostles he officially approved a new level of development in the church: adding the Samaritan believers. God confirmed this new phase by sending the Holy Spirit as a visible sign of his divine presence. As he declared his presence among the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, so he affirmed his nearness to the Samaritan believers.

Notice also that when Peter preached in the house of Cornelius and baptized Gentile believers, God once again approved of a new period in the growth of the church by sending his Spirit (10:44). I conclude, then, that as the apostles fulfilled the mandate to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Samaria, and the Gentile world (1:8), God sanctioned every initial stage with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. God affirmed this new phase in Samaria through the apostles and not through Philip.

Second, is not the Spirit at work among the Samaritans when they accept Christ in faith? Definitely; these believers are baptized externally with water and internally experience rebirth and renewal through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; 2 Thess. 2:13; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 1:2). The significance of the outpouring of the Spirit on the Samaritan believers, accordingly, lies in the visible signs that result from the Spirit’s arrival (compare 10:45–46; 19:6; 1 Cor. 14:27). The power of the Holy Spirit, evident in the lives of Jewish believers after Pentecost, now becomes reality in the hearts and lives of believers in Samaria. In other words, the outpouring of the Spirit upon the Samaritans is proof of their equality with the Jerusalem believers.

Third, why did Philip baptize the Samaritans only in the name of Jesus? We see an inconsistency with the Great Commission formula that prescribes baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). But note that the emphasis in this formula is on the word *name,* which refers to God’s full revelation in word and deed. Philip baptized the people in this full revelation and specified the name *Jesus* (see v. 12). He followed the common contemporary formula for baptism (see 2:38; 10:48; 19:5). This particular formula should be understood in the historical context of apostolic preaching in which the expression *the name of Jesus* occurs numerous times.

We should not place more emphasis on the baptism formula than the historical circumstances warrant. Concludes Donald Guthrie, “There is no support for the view that the use of the triune name would be regarded as any more or less effective than the simple name of Jesus.” The context shows that Philip proclaims Jesus to the Samaritans (v. 12); hence, their baptism in that name means that their baptism is the same as that of the Jewish Christians.

**17. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.**

Peter and John, representing the twelve apostles, place their hands on the Samaritan believers, who consequently receive the Holy Spirit. This event marks the full Samaritan participation in the Christian church (also see 19:6). The event itself is lucid and simple. Interpreting its meaning, however, has always been problematic because of varying theological views. We are unable to discuss these views at length and will limit ourselves to a few comments.

In certain segments of the church, theologians derive the sacrament or rite of confirmation from this passage. For example, in harmony with a papal letter, Roman Catholic theologians teach that “the imposition of hands is designated by the anointing of the forehead which by another name is called confirmation, because through it the Holy Spirit is given for an increase [of grace] and strength.” They say that as the apostles in the early church confirmed the Samaritans by placing their hands on them, so the church as successor to the apostles today confirms the faithful.

However, in apostolic times Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, who did not receive apostolic confirmation (8:36–39). Conversely, Ananias placed his hands on Saul, who then received the Holy Spirit (9:17). Yet Ananias was not an apostle. Peter did not place his hands on those who were baptized in Cornelius’s household (10:44–48). And Paul did not lay his hands on the Philippian jailer and the members of his household, even though they were baptized (16:30–34).

Except for 19:6, the historical context in Acts fails to lend support to the teaching that the church must have a sacrament of confirmation that is administered by placing hands on every believer, so that he or she may receive the Holy Spirit. In fact, the New Testament does not command the church to follow the practice of Peter and John in Samaria. “On the other hand, there is no reason why the scriptural practice of laying on of hands with prayer should not be continued as such, [that is,] so long as there is no thought of a necessary bestowal of spiritual gifts by this means.”

What does the New Testament teach us about the reception of the Holy Spirit? The outpouring of the Spirit occurred in Jerusalem (2:1–4) and was repeated when the church added new groups: the Samaritans (8:11–17), the Gentiles (10:44–47), and the disciples of John the Baptist (19:1–7). But apart from these special manifestations, the New Testament is devoid of references to Jews or Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit by the laying on of apostolic hands. Because of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit remains with the church and lives in the hearts of all true believers (see Rom. 5:5; 8:9–11; Eph. 1:13; 4:30). Paul reveals that the bodies of believers are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19). Therefore, from these New Testament passages we learn “that those who believe and are baptized have also the Spirit of God.”

*d. Opposing Simon*

*8:18–23*

Here is the second part of the account about Simon (see vv. 9–13) that stands in direct contrast to God’s gift of the Holy Spirit to the Samaritans. Luke skillfully places Barnabas’s generosity (4:36–37) over against the deceit of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1–11). He compares God’s majestic power with Satan’s wicked influence. Accordingly, Luke depicts the Samaritans receiving the Holy Spirit in the expanding church and Satan using Simon to make a mockery of the Christian faith.

Simon’s actions reveal that he has not experienced a genuine conversion and has not received the Spirit. Seeing the external evidence of the Spirit, Simon evaluates gifts on a commercial basis and offers the apostles money for the presence of the Spirit.

**18. When Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money** **19. and said, “Give me also this power, so that anyone on whom I place my hands may receive the Spirit.”**

When the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit, the Spirit’s presence is evident in external signs. Although Luke’s terse description omits details, we assume that some signs, perhaps in the form of miracles, were visible to the people. For Simon, who thinks in terms of the magic arts, possession of these extraordinary gifts becomes imperative. He, too, wishes to have at his disposal the power that Philip displayed when he healed the sick and cast out demons. Simon noticed that the Jerusalem apostles placed their hands on the Samaritans, who then received the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit. The fact that he was by-passed because of his lack of genuine faith does not occur to him.

In earlier days, Simon had obtained magical formulas from other practitioners by paying them certain amounts of money. And he had charged the people fees for the services he rendered. Now he approaches Peter and John, whom he considers agents of the Holy Spirit, and offers them money. If he is able to purchase this supernatural power, he will rise to even greater heights than he achieved before his conversion to the Christian faith. Thus, Simon tries to purchase spiritual gifts. Incidentally, in English the term *simony* means the buying or selling of an ecclesiastical office or obtaining an ecclesiastical promotion by offering money.

When Simon offers Peter and John money, he is not trying to bribe them or pay them an honorarium for becoming their associate. Instead, he is of the opinion that he can purchase a priesthood from Peter and John in much the same manner as he is able to obtain a priesthood in any pagan religion. In the first half of the first century, such priesthoods were often sold by auction.

“Give me also this power, so that anyone on whom I place my hands may receive the Spirit.” Simon has intentions of being a leader in the Samaritan church with authority to place hands on people to give them the Holy Spirit. He wants to function as a priest who is subordinate to the apostles. For him, the Holy Spirit is a power that can be subjected to the will of man.

Simon offends God by placing the Holy Spirit on the same level as his magic arts. Because he wants to buy the Spirit of God, he demonstrates that he has no knowledge of spiritual matters. He fails to see that the apostles possess heavenly power to glorify God. He wants to have supernatural powers to promote himself.

**20. But Peter said to him: “May your silver perish with you because you thought to purchase the gift of God with money!”**

Note the contrast between God’s servants and Simon the sorcerer. Although Jesus instructed his disciples that the worker deserves his wages (Luke 10:7) and that those who proclaim the gospel should receive adequate remuneration for their work (1 Cor. 9:4), he never told them to charge people for their services. Listen to Paul, who states categorically that he has not desired any gold, silver, or clothing from anyone, but has worked with his own hands to meet his needs (Acts 20:33–35; 2 Cor. 11:7; see also 1 Peter 5:2).

Believers who receive spiritual benefits are not charged and do not pay for them, because Jesus said, “Freely you have received, freely give” (Matt. 10:8). This is in harmony with the Old Testament example of Elisha, who refused to accept a gift for healing Naaman from leprosy. But his servant, Gehazi, who took money and clothes from Naaman, contracted leprosy—punishment for his greed (2 Kings 5:15–16, 23–27). Similarly, Simon approaches spiritual matters from a commercial point of view and thus hears Peter pronounce a curse over him.

“May your silver perish with you because you thought to purchase the gift of God with money.” Peter zealously guards God’s glory and honor and rebuffs the attacks of Satan, who, through Simon, seeks to pervert the truth. He utters a curse that has an Old Testament echo, for he tells Simon that he and his money are on the way to hell. Peter’s curse has far-reaching significance that relates not merely to the elimination of money and to Simon’s physical death, but even to his state after death. Simon’s sin is that he values God’s Spirit in terms of a given sum of money, that money as such is of chief importance to him, and that he worships the creature (money) rather than God.

**21. “You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.”**

Peter excludes Simon completely from the Christian community by saying that Simon has neither part nor lot in receiving the Holy Spirit. If Simon had part or lot in this matter, he would not have to ask for it. The word *part* points to partnership and the term *lot* to ownership. The words are an idiom that was well known to the Levites, because they had no share or inheritance in the real estate of Israel. Simon the sorcerer, however, has no share or lot in the Lord (contrast Isa. 57:6). He is completely unqualified to receive the Holy Spirit and to become a teacher of the Good News. The words *this matter* refer to the work of teaching and preaching Christ’s gospel.

Why is Simon excluded? With spiritual discernment Peter looks at Simon and says, “Your heart is not right before God.” Peter is actually quoting from Psalm 78:37, where the psalmist records the unfaithfulness of the rebellious Israelites who perished in the desert. Peter looks at the wellspring of Simon’s life and knows that spiritually Simon is serving not God but himself. There is only one way to effect a change in this condition and that is to repent. By implication, Simon’s earlier confession of faith and subsequent baptism (v. 13) are meaningless because of this unrepentant heart. Therefore, Peter shows him the way of salvation and says,

**22. “Repent, then, of this wickedness of yours and pray to the Lord. If possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.** **23. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity.”**

a. *Contrast.* Comparing the account about Ananias and Sapphira (5:1–11) with that about Simon the sorcerer, we see a number of differences. Ananias and Sapphira were Jewish Christians who professed to know the Lord and to be filled with the Holy Spirit. They belonged to the true Israel; they were baptized and instructed in the faith by the apostles. They sinned against the Holy Spirit by purposely deceiving and testing him. So God took the lives of Ananias and Sapphira as a sign of his displeasure but also as a measure to keep the early church pure.

Conversely, Simon was a Samaritan who made a verbal confession of faith but whose heart was not right with God. He did not receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Formerly he had been the sorcerer known as “the power of God,” but now, after observing Philip’s miracles, joined the believers. Simon grievously sinned against God by desiring to buy the gift of the Holy Spirit. Although Peter pronounced a curse on Simon, he also showed him the way of deliverance. Hence, we conclude that Simon sinned in ignorance because he had never been set free from the bondage of wickedness. His was not the sin against the Holy Spirit.

b. *Condition.* “Repent, then, of this wickedness of yours and pray to the Lord.” Peter gives Simon the opportunity to repent. He tells him to repent and ask the Lord to forgive him. Notice that Peter does not forgive his sin, even though Jesus gave him the authority to do so (John 20:23). He directs Simon to petition the Lord for remission of sin. “The apostles themselves referred the forgiveness of sins to, and left it in, the sovereign power of God, and not to their own delegated power of absolution.” Peter advises Simon to repent and ask the Lord to remove his sin and the curse Peter has pronounced upon Simon.

“If possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.” Peter prefaces his suggestion to find remission of sin with the phrase *if possible*. This conditional statement relates not to God’s ability to forgive sin but to Simon’s willingness to repent. Simon has to cleanse his heart from the intent to buy the gift of the Spirit, and he has to change the course of his life to be in harmony with God.

c. *Constriction.* “You are in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity.” Here Peter alludes to passages from the Old Testament. Moses warns the Israelites not to worship other gods and to avoid having a root of bitterness among them (Deut. 29:18; and see Heb. 12:15). Moses says this in the context of God’s unwillingness to forgive sin should there be such bitter poison in their midst. Peter likewise warns Simon not to have “the gall of bitterness.” The metaphor relates to the bitter spirit in a person and to the bitterness he imparts to people who meet him. In addition, Simon is a slave to sin through the bond of iniquity that constricts him (compare Isa. 58:6).

God wants no person filled with bitterness and fettered to iniquity to be in the company of his people, because bitterness belongs to Satan. Gall is actually the fruit of bitterness and thus the exact opposite of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, and so on (Gal. 5:22–23). God wants his people to be happy and free.

**Doctrinal Considerations in 8:18–23**

Was Simon the sorcerer ever a true believer? Luke reports that Simon believed and was baptized (v. 13). He uses the same verb for the Samaritans who accepted the good news of salvation and the message of Christ’s kingdom (v. 12). But if Simon had experienced genuine conversion, he would have provided evidence of true faith. Sixteenth-century theologian Zacharias Ursinus asked, “What is true faith?” and answered:

True faith is

not only a knowledge and conviction

that everything God reveals in his Word is true;

it is also a deep-rooted assurance

created in me by the Holy Spirit through the gospel

that, out of sheer grace earned for us by Christ,

not only others, but I too,

have had my sins forgiven,

have been made forever right with God,

and have been granted salvation.

Simon never experienced genuine conversion and never had true faith. His faith was never rooted in regeneration and therefore it was temporary (see Matt. 13:21). For this reason, Peter told Simon to repent, because faith and repentance are the two sides of the same coin. When there is true faith, there is genuine repentance. Peter admonished Simon to repent because he lacked true faith.[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. Kistemaker, S. J., & Hendriksen, W. (1953–2001). [*Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*](https://ref.ly/logosres/bkrc-ac?ref=Bible.Ac8.18-23&off=10549) (Vol. 17, pp. 303–307). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)