

Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work
Sunday Morning Bible Study
Lesson Six – Acts 8:1-40
Philip the Evangelist

In his continued warfare against the church the devil finally overreached himself. His attack had the opposite effect to what he intended. Instead of smothering the gospel, persecution succeeded only in spreading it.

Beginning the day of Stephen's death, persecution broke out with the ferocity of a sudden storm. Saul, who approved of Stephen's stoning, now began to destroy the church. This great persecution led to great dispersion: all except the apostles were scattered. The scattering of the Christians was followed by the scattering of the good seed of the gospel. For those who scattered preached the word wherever they went.

So we see in the midst of persecution wonderful things have happened. The Holy Spirit has revealed himself in mighty and miraculous ways. He has caused men and women to come to Jesus and the church to grow. We have seen him severely discipline a couple who lied to God and pretended to be something that they were not. We have witnessed men full of the Spirit both preaching Christ and dying for him. Now we are going to look at his work in Philip, who was filled with the Spirit and called by the Spirit away from "where the action was" to share the good news about Jesus with one individual—an Ethiopian.

Open

- Do you see yourself as an evangelist? Explain.

Study

1. *Read Acts 8:1-25.* In this chapter the command to be witnesses in Judea and Samaria (see Acts 1:8) is fulfilled. What are the causes and extent of the spread of the gospel?

The hostility between Jews and Samaritans had lasted a thousand years. It began with the monarchy in the tenth century B.C. when ten tribes defected, making Samaria their capital, and only two tribes remained loyal to Jerusalem. It became steadily worse when Samaria was captured by Assyria in 722 B.C. Thousands of its inhabitants were deported, and the country was repopulated by foreigners. In the sixth century B.C., when the Jews returned to their land, they refused the help of the Samaritans in the rebuilding of the temple. Not till the fourth century B.C., however, did the Samaritan schism harden, with the building of their rival temple on Mount Gerizim and their rejection of all Old Testament Scripture except the Pentateuch. The Samaritans were despised by the Jews.

2. How is it significant that Philip, a Jew, went to Samaria (v. 5)?

The Samaritans were despised by the Jews. They weren't seen as true Jews. So, it was as if Philip was proclaiming the Gospel to Gentiles.

3. How was Simon the Sorcerer's life affected by the gospel (vv. 9-13)?

He stopped practicing magic when he believed in the Gospel. He was no longer one whom everyone talked about as being "great." He was amazed by the power of God rather than by the power of Satan.

4. What did Peter teach Simon about following Jesus (vv. 18-24)?

The things of God cannot be bought with money. Following Jesus involves having a "right heart." Repentance is necessary when a follower of Jesus sins.

5. Why do you think it was important for the church in Jerusalem to send Peter and John to minister to the new believers in Samaria?

Jerusalem was the center/hub of the new religion, Christianity. When Peter and John went out, they went as representatives of "the church in Jerusalem." Therefore, when Peter and John commended the Samaritans and laid hands on them to receive the Spirit, it was as if the Jerusalem church was saying, "Yes, the Samaritans are equal partakers of the Gospel. They are no different than us."

Summary: The gospel had been welcomed by the Samaritans, but would the Samaritans be welcomed by the Jews? Or would there be separate factions of Jewish Christians and Samaritan Christians in the church of Jesus Christ? The idea may seem unthinkable in theory; in practice it might well have happened. Is it not reasonable to suggest (in view of this historical background) that, in order to avoid just such a disaster, God deliberately withheld the Spirit from these Samaritan converts? The delay was only temporary, however, until the apostles had come down to investigate, had endorsed Philip's bold policy of Samaritan evangelism, had prayed for the converts, had laid hands on them as a sign to the whole church as well as to the Samaritan converts themselves, that they were *bona fide* Christians, to be incorporated into the redeemed community on precisely the same terms as Jewish converts.

1. *Read Acts 8:26-40.* What were the factors involved in the Ethiopian eunuch's becoming a Christian?

He was reading from Isaiah 53. Philip was sent by God to explain the scriptures to the eunuch and tell him the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The eunuch repented (presumably), believed the Gospel, and was baptized (though baptism did not make him a Christian. It was just an outward sign).

2. What would it have been like for Philip to leave a place where so many exciting things were happening to go down a desert road?

He might have been saddened that he was leaving the "exciting" ministry. Yet, I have to think that, because he realized an angel of the Lord spoke to him, he probably knew that there was a good reason for him to leave. He was certainly obedient to the call of God, so presumably he trusted that what was down the desert road was more important for him than what was in Samaria.

3. What role did Scripture play in the eunuch's conversion?

The Scriptures contained the truth about who Jesus was and what his mission was. Isaiah 53 was prophesy about the "suffering servant," Jesus. The eunuch needed to *know* the truth about Jesus in order to *trust* the truth about Jesus. The Spirit of God uses the Word of God to do the Work of God.

4. Ethiopia was the extreme boundary of the habitable world in the hot south. How was Philip's ministry to the eunuch the beginning of the witness "to the ends of the earth"?

The eunuch took the Gospel back to Ethiopia, where it would have continued to spread. What's interesting is that this is the first example we see (other than the crowds in Acts 2) of "the nations coming to us." Because of travel, Philip was able to impact a far away country through the Ethiopian eunuch without ever actually going to Ethiopia.

5. People refer to different kinds of evangelism, such as door-to-door, friendship, mass and tract evangelism. What different kinds of evangelism do you observe throughout this whole passage?

Mass preaching to crowds, one-on-one evangelism, meeting with small groups in homes, explaining Christ in the Scriptures.

6. What principles of evangelism do you see in this passage?

Be obedient when God leads you to share with someone (Philip), teach the Scriptures to people who don't understand them, always point to Christ, take the Gospel to everyone regardless of race or socio-economic status.

Summary: The people Philip shared the good news with were different in race, rank and religion. The Samaritans were of mixed race, half-Jewish and half-Gentile, and Asiatic, while the Ethiopian was a black African, though probably a Jew by birth. As for rank, the Samaritans were presumably ordinary citizens, whereas the Ethiopian was a distinguished public servant in the employment of the Crown. Religious differences included the fact that the Samaritans revered Moses but rejected the prophets, while the Ethiopian was returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and was reading one of the very prophets the Samaritans rejected. Yet despite their differences in racial origin, social class and religion, Philip presented them both with the same good news of Jesus.

Apply

- How are you encouraged by what you are learning about the Holy Spirit?

What have you learned from this passage that might help you become a more effective witness?

How has your view of God's work in the world grown as a result of studying this passage?

Pray

- Ask God to give you a joyful confidence in the truth, power and relevance of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

All material taken from:

John Stott, *Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work*. Downers Grove, IL: IV Press, USA, 1998.