The Weekly Word

November 15-21, 2021

Hello Bible readers. This week we continue Luke's account of the early church reading Acts 7-8. I hope you are blessed as you join me. Happy reading...

Grace and Peace, Bill

To hear the Bible read click this link... http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/audio/.

Monday, November 15: Acts 7:1-50 NIV2011

I wondered whether to split up this long section, 50 verses, but realizing it is one long speech and that it is a recitation of OT history I decided to keep it intact and use the whole section for my Bible reading today.

¹ Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?"

² To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran. ³ 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.' ^k

⁴ "So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. ⁵ He gave him no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. ⁶ God spoke to him in this way: 'For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. ⁷ But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,' God said, 'and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.' ^{p 8} Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.

⁹ "Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him ¹⁰ and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So, Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.

¹¹ "Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our ancestors could not find food. ¹² When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers on their first visit. ¹³ On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family. ¹⁴ After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. ¹⁵ Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our ancestors died. ¹⁶ Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money.

¹⁷ "As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt had greatly increased. ¹⁸ Then 'a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.' ^{h 19} He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our ancestors by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.

²⁰ "At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for by his family. ²¹ When he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. ²² Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.

²³ "When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites. ²⁴ He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. ²⁵ Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. ²⁶ The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, 'Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?'

²⁷ "But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us? ²⁸ Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' ²⁹ When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons.

³⁰ "After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. ³¹ When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to get a closer look, he heard the Lord say: ³² 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look.

³³ "Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. ³⁴ I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.' ^s

³⁵ "This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, 'Who made you ruler and judge?' He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. ³⁶ He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness.

 37 "This is the Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.' $^{y\ 38}$ He was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us.

³⁹ "But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. ⁴⁰ They told Aaron, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don't know what has happened to him!' ^{e 41} That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made. ⁴² But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets:

"'Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel?

43 You have taken up the tabernacle of Molek and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship.

Therefore, I will send you into exile' beyond Babylon.

⁴⁴ "Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. ⁴⁵ After receiving the

tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, ⁴⁶ who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁿ But it was Solomon who built a house for him.

⁴⁸ "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says:

49 " 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? 50 Has not my hand made all these things?' s

What does the passage say? (What is this passage about?)

As I read this passage, I had to continually remind myself that Stephen was speaking these facts to the Sanhedrin who had arrested him for signs and wonders and speaking about Jesus. I recognize that Stephen will bring his speech to a scathing conclusion in the next paragraph, but I'll leave that for tomorrow.

I am not going to recount here the vast Old Testament history from Abraham up through Solomon and the building of the temple. The fact that Stephen is able to provide this historical monologue in a stressful situation before the Sanhedrin is a testimony to his depth of faith. Now certainly the Holy Spirit was with him bringing to his mind these key events and giving him the courage to speak this to the Jewish leaders. Still, I feel quite certain that Stephen held this firm grasp of Old Testament history and that these words represent a faithful life dedicated to the word of God even before he found faith in Jesus Christ.

Would that the entire Church of Jesus Christ have an equal grasp of God's movement throughout history. God holds all things in His hands, God is the author of history and the author of life.

Stephen demonstrated to the elders and teachers of the law that he had a keen grasp of his spiritual heritage and the teachings of God Almighty imbedded in the Old Testament.

What does the passage mean for all Christians? (The meaning of the passage needs to fit believers everywhere in the world.)

I sit marveling at Stephen's understanding of the Old Testament, and I believe that this passage and the example of Stephen issues a call to the church to learn our history, to understand the Bible both Old and New Testaments and finally to live with the conviction that God is in control and God is working all things as He knows He should.

What is the Holy Spirit saying to me through this passage?

I am a bit intimidated by Stephen's grasp of God's activity in history on behalf of Israel. God's word is true and real and available for all of us, for me, to know the workings of God throughout history. Oh Lord, I remain dedicated to knowing Your work and Your will in our world.

Tuesday, November 16: Acts 7:51-8:1 NIV2011

⁵¹ "You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵² Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—⁵³ you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it."

⁵⁴When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

8:1 And Saul approved of their killing him.

What does the passage say? (What is this passage about?)

This is a stunning conclusion to Stephen's opening words. He makes a dramatic turn calling the leaders of the Jewish people stiff-necked and saying their ears and hearts are uncircumcised. He knows that many of the prophets were persecuted for the words they spoke, even prophets who predicted the coming of the Righteous One (Jesus). At this point Stephen drives a dagger into the Jewish leaders' hearts saying, you have betrayed and murdered him - you whoever received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.

The Sanhedrin erupted in fury. Stephen, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, looked to heaven and saw the glory of Jesus standing before the right hand of God. He then said to the fuming religious leaders, "Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God".

At this the religious leaders became more like a mob; they covered their ears and yelling at the top of their voices they rushed him and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, *Lord Jesus receive my spirit. Lord, do not hold this sin against them.* As he prayed these words, he fell asleep (and died). While the crowd was stoning Stephen, Saul stood by approving his death and many witnesses laid their coats at the Saul's feet (this was an act of homage and appreciation).

[Note this is the first time someone other than an apostle is persecuted for believing in Jesus.]

What does the passage mean for all Christians? (The meaning of the passage needs to fit believers everywhere in the world.)

Certainly, this passage reminds us that even the best people of faith can be persecuted for their faith. More than that, this passage is an example of a man full of faith and wisdom who in

the moments of a torturous death was still able to forgive his torturers just like his Savior forgave those who crucified Him. This powerful picture of forgiveness is a constant reminder for all of us who follow Jesus that we too should forgive and that the Holy Spirit in us can give us the power to forgive.

What is the Holy Spirit saying to me through this passage?

Every time I pray the Lord's prayer, I pray these words, "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us". Lord God, in this passage I see the depths of forgiveness you call me to have for those who have hurt me or sinned against me. Lord God, help me be a man who extends forgiveness as readily as you extend forgiveness. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Wednesday, November 17: 8:1-3 NIV2011

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ² Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. ³ But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

What does the passage say? (What is this passage about?)

Stephen's death opened the floodgate of persecution. No longer were the apostles the only ones in the crosshairs of Jewish leaders. Now anyone who follows Jesus was fair came for persecution.

As a great persecution broke out against the church, believers were scattered throughout the surrounding regions of Judea and Samaria. [Interesting isn't it, that persecution forced the spread of the Gospel as believers scattered throughout the region?} Stephen was buried and the church mourned his death.

The man who was presiding over Stephen's stoning, went on a rampage against the church. Luke's words are graphic, *Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison*. [It is clear that no one was safe... Saul went after both men and women.]

What does the passage mean for all Christians? (The meaning of the passage needs to fit believers everywhere in the world.)

This account reminds us of potential consequences for anyone who puts their faith in Jesus. It also shows us, without saying so directly, that God will see His will accomplished. The church was not quick to begin the journey to the ends of the earth, so God sped up Gospel advance by using persecution, scattering Christians throughout the known world.

God's will, will be done.

What is the Holy Spirit saying to me through this passage?

I need to be prepared for the potential of persecution at anytime. Even more I need to work at obeying God's directives obediently; otherwise, God may need to use "force" to cause me to act obediently.

Thursday, November 18: Acts 8:4-8 NIV2011

⁴ Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. ⁵ Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. ⁶ When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. ⁷ For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed, or lame were healed. ⁸ So there was great joy in that city.

What does the passage say? (What is this passage about?)

This paragraph begins telling the story of Phillip, another one of the seven chosen back in Acts 6.

First, we learned that everyone who was scattered carried the word with them wherever they went. Luke in fact says *they preached the word wherever they went*.

Luke begins chronicling the story of Phillip. Phillip fled to the area of Samaria and began to proclaim the name of Jesus as Messiah there. His preaching and wonder-working signs drew crowds who paid close attention to his words. [I'm reminded that Jesus made significant inroads in Samaria as well when He met with the woman at the well see John 4.] The ministry of Phillip created quite a stir and great joy in the city to which he went. Demons came out of people and the lame were healed.

What does the passage mean for all Christians? (The meaning of the passage needs to fit believers everywhere in the world.)

As with Stephen, the preaching, witnessing and miracle-working by regular church people including the seven chosen in Acts 6 created a great stir. Wherever they went they shared the name of Jesus. This is a great word to us in the church... We too can have significant influence among people who do not know Jesus if we will simply witness to Jesus, tell His story, and do acts of compassion and or miracles as God would lead us. Faithful living connected to faithful sharing of Jesus is God's prime method for spreading the Gospel and leading people to faith in Jesus.

What is the Holy Spirit saying to me through this passage?

From above: faithful living connected to faithful sharing of Jesus is God's prime method for spreading the gospel...

Is faithful living connected to faithful sharing of Jesus true characteristics of my life? The Lord is piercing me with this question.

Friday, November 19: Acts 8:9-25 NIV2011

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 rightly called the Great Power of God." ¹¹ They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery. ¹² But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed 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 Samaria. ¹⁵ When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in 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 in the hope that he may 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."

²⁵ After they had further proclaimed the word of the Lord and testified about Jesus, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.

What does the passage say? (What is this passage about?)

It is wise to keep in mind Acts 1:8, But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Luke is demonstrating the truth of Jesus' Word as he details the Gospel's move from Judea to Samaria through the work and ministry of Phillip.

The venturing of the Gospel into new lands is always fraught with growing pains, as we will discover in the story of Samaria and Simon the sorcery worker from Samaria.

We read in yesterday's text that persecution scattered Phillip to some area where he had a ministry of witness and miracle working. We learned today that living in Samaria was a man named Simon who had a thriving sorcery practice in Samaria. People flocked to Simon. Both Simon and the people considered him a great man. When Phillip came to town with the message of Jesus corroborated by signs and wonders many people were baptized. Even Simon was baptized and followed Phillip astonished by what they saw happening in and through Phillip.

As news got back to the apostles in Jerusalem about a move of God's Spirit in Samaria, they sent Peter and John to check things out. When the duo arrived, they found a vibrancy of faith but realized that the believers had only been baptized into Jesus' name and had not yet received the Holy Spirit. So, they laid their hands on the believers so they may receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Luke does not describe any manifestations when the apostles laid their hands on believers, but something visible must have been happening.) Simon who watched the apostles lay hands on individuals offered Peter and John money so that he might have a gift that they had. Luke records Simon's ask, give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.

Peter was disgusted and answered, may your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money!... He goes on to call Simon to repentance for the wickedness that he displayed for asking/thinking he could buy the gift of the Spirit. Peter also

said, repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart...

Simon immediately shows some remorse and asked the apostles *pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me*. The apostles remained in Samaria for a while longer testifying about Jesus. Then they returned to Jerusalem preaching in various towns and villages of Samaria as they returned home.

What does the passage mean for all Christians? (The meaning of the passage needs to fit believers everywhere in the world.)

Thinking about what this teaches the church, it is important to remember that the book of Acts is descriptive not prescriptive.

One thing we learn is that as the Gospel ventures into new lands with non-Jewish backgrounds, we will meet people who have various spiritual abilities that may not be from the Lord. And these people will likely have different sensibilities than people steeped in Judeo-Christian culture. Simon had some spiritual power but since he didn't know God, clearly his power was not from God the Father. When he saw power displayed in Phillip and more notably the apostles, John and Peter, he was seduced by a desire for that power. When we take the Gospel into new areas we don't necessarily know the besetting sins of the community and how that might cause people to react inappropriately to various aspects of the Good News of the Gospel. (For example, in the highly materialistic western world, and America in particular, we see prosperity discoloring the Gospel message of God's blessings.)

Secondly, the story of Simon shows that confession and repentance are always available to us in Jesus. Peter doesn't dismiss and cast Simon away for his greed; instead, Peter calls Simon to repentance, which Luke emphasizes with Simon's prayer.

What is the Holy Spirit saying to me through this passage?

I need to expect the unexpected when sharing Jesus with others. I also need to be careful not to allow crazy statements to shut me off from sharing and witnessing to the love and mercy of Jesus.

Saturday, November 20: Acts 8:26-40 NIV2011

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 ^t eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "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 This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its 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." x

³⁶ As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" [^{37]} 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.

What does the passage say? (What is this passage about?)

Talk about exciting days of Gospel expansion; this account from beginning to end is filled with the works of God, the Holy Spirit, propelling the witness of Jesus towards the ends of the earth.

Phillip got a direct revelation from the angel of the Lord telling him to go south on a particular road. There he came across an Ethiopian official. The man had recently been in Jerusalem to worship and now was heading home. Traveling in his chariot he was reading from the prophet Isaiah. The Spirit told Phillip to go up near the chariot (where he could hear what the Ethiopian was reading). Approaching the chariot Phillip asked Ethiopian if he could understand what he was reading and he said he couldn't and invited Phillip to help him understand. He was reading a passage from Isaiah 53. Phillip began with that passage and told the Ethiopian the Good News about Jesus.

As they traveled near a body of water the Ethiopian asked what was keeping him from being baptized. So, Phillip led the man down into the water and baptized him. As they were coming up out of the water the Spirit suddenly took Phillip away from the man, they never saw each other again. The man went away rejoicing and Phillip appeared in Azotus where he traveled about preaching the Gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

What does the passage mean for all Christians? (The meaning of the passage needs to fit believers everywhere in the world.)

As a result of this encounter there will be a disciple and witness among the Ethiopian people. God is advancing His Kingdom towards the ends of the earth.

One thing to learn from this passage is to be attentive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. From his decision to go to that particular road and head South, to his approaching the chariot, to his unfolding the gospel message, to the baptism of the Ethiopian each step is clearly led by God the Holy Spirit. Phillip had to constantly be listening for the voice of the Lord telling him where

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.

to go and whom to approach. This is good news for the church because we all can hear the voice of the Lord if we keep our hearts and minds open to the leading of the Lord God Almighty through his Holy Spirit.

I also found myself pondering baptism and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. In the immediately preceding story Luke made a big case about the apostles coming and baptizing the believers in Samaria in the Holy Spirit. In this passage we only see the Ethiopian being baptized in water. But given the context, it seems that we have to understand that as the Ethiopian was baptized in the water he was also baptized in the Holy Spirit, although nothing is said about Holy Spirit baptism in this passage. Remembering that Acts is descriptive not prescriptive I don't want to go too far. However, it seems, at least in this case, that the Holy Spirit was granted to the Ethiopian when he submitted to baptism. And that the presence of the Holy Spirit is manifested in his rejoicing as he travels home.

What is the Holy Spirit saying to me through this passage?

God is shouting clearly to me, "keep your ears, your eyes and your heart open to hearing My voice and seeing what I am doing around you so that you, Bill, can be a participant in My activity in the world".

Sunday, November 21, 2021 - Sunday Worship

If any of my thoughts or the Bible readings spark questions send an email reply and I will do my best to answer all questions from people on the list... I will answer personal questions privately; general questions will be answered in a subsequent email installment.

If you are reading along with me from the Living Hope website you can send questions or request being placed on the weekly email list by emailing Lisa at office@LivingHopeCT.org.

Click here for an audio link to my sermons, https://livinghopect.org/resources/audio-sermons. Sermons are generally posted within 2 days. We also livestream our full services which are up on our YouTube channel, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCgKURRsbX92qqIFgDF1iRWA