

Acts 8 – Saul Persecutes the Church

CHAPTER 8

THEME: Conversion of Ethiopian eunuch (son of Ham).

We have now arrived at the second major division of the Book of Acts. You remember that we divided the book according to the Lord's commission in Act_1:8. First they were to witness in Jerusalem. Now we come to the Lord Jesus Christ's work by the Holy Spirit through the apostles in Judea and Samaria. This section of the book includes chapters 8–12.

Chapter 7 concluded with a most unusual scene. It included the two young men who had the greatest influence upon the early church. The one was Stephen, the deacon, the young man who gave up his life, the first martyr in the church. That other was a young Pharisee who had charge of the stoning of Stephen. His name was Saul. - McGee

Saul Ravages the Church

Act 8:1 Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

Saul was taking the lead in the persecution of Stephen, and he was in the cheering section. Now this young man, Saul of Tarsus, was amazed when he saw the face of Stephen. Stephen was looking into the heavens, and there he saw the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. Young Saul looked up—he didn't see anything. But, friend, he wished he could. He will see a little later. I believe that Stephen is the one who prepared Saul for the appearance of the Lord Jesus on the Damascus road.

Saul becomes the chief persecutor of the church. This causes the church to scatter. Actually, he does the church a favor. They were all settled down in Jerusalem, and I don't think they would have moved out had it not been for the persecution which Saul of Tarsus instigated.

Judea and Samaria are the next territories which the Lord had told them to enter. Judea surrounds Jerusalem, and Samaria lies to the north of Jerusalem. - McGee

Act 8:2 And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.

I would like to make a few remarks here about Christian burial. There is a question that comes to us today: Is it right or wrong for Christians to be cremated? There is nothing in the Bible against it. No one will lose salvation by being cremated. However, the burial of a Christian is like sowing seeds. It is like putting the body into a motel so it can sleep until the Resurrection.

This is the way Paul speaks of it in 1 Thessalonians 4. He speaks of the body as seed in 1 Corinthians 15. You don't burn the seed before you plant it. Neither do you burn a person before you put him into a motel or hotel to go to sleep. Planting the body in the earth like a seed is a testimony—an evidence of your faith in a future resurrection. Undoubtedly the body of Stephen was terribly mutilated. They took him up tenderly and put him in the ground as you would plant a seed. Stephen had gone into the presence of Christ, who was waiting in heaven for him. His body went into the ground to await the Resurrection. "So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body"

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(1Co_15:42-44). I cannot see that cremation sets forth this idea. Rather, this is the picture of real Christian burial.

Some people protest that we are running out of space for graves. My friend, this old earth has taken in bodies for thousands of years now, and there is still room. - McGee

Act 8:3 As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.

This was a young man full of zeal. Remember that he later wrote about himself—“Concerning zeal, persecuting the church ...” in Php_3:6.

Philip Proclaims Christ in Samaria

Act 8:4 Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.

Here we see the effect of the persecution. Actually, it did not hinder the church but furthered the work of the church. Later on, Paul would give this same kind of testimony after he had been put into prison in Rome, “But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel” (Php_1:12). I do not believe that the church can ever be hurt from the outside. It can be hurt from the inside, as we shall see later in this chapter.

Act 8:5-8 Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. And there was great joy in that city.

The dispersal of the Christians did not silence their testimony. Everywhere they went they carried the good news of salvation. Philip, the “deacon” of chapter six, headed north to the city of Samaria. He not only proclaimed Christ but performed many miracles. Unclean spirits were driven out and the paralyzed and lame were healed. The people gave heed to the gospel, and, as might be expected, great joy resulted.

The primitive church obeyed the explicit commands of Jesus Christ:

It went out as Christ had gone (Joh_20:21; cf. Act_8:1-4).

It sold its goods and gave to the poor (Luk_12:33; Luk_18:22; cf. Act_2:45; Act_4:34).

It left father, mother, houses, and lands to go everywhere preaching the Word (Mat_10:37; cf. Act_8:1-4).

It made disciples and taught them to work and obey (Mat_28:18-19; cf. 1Th_1:6).

It took up its cross and followed Christ (Acts 4; 1 Thess. 2).

It rejoiced in tribulation and persecution (Mat_5:11-12; cf. Acts 16; 1Th_1:6-8).

It left the dead to bury their dead and went and preached the gospel (Luk_9:59-60).

It shook the dust from off its feet and moved on when men refused to hear (Luk_9:5; cf. Act_13:51).

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It healed, exorcised, raised the dead, and bore lasting fruit (Mar_16:18; Acts 3-16). – Believers Bible Commentary

Simon the Magician Believes

Act 8:9-11 But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the great power of God." And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time.

He sets himself up as some great one. We find the same sort of thing today. If someone claims to be a faith healer, that sets him apart, believe me. People may declare that the faith healers are humble. Humility is not manifest in services where a person is supposedly healing people and implying that he is the only person there who has that gift. That is “giving out that himself was some great one,” as Simon the sorcerer was doing.

These people felt that Simon the sorcerer was like a god. Just as with these people, there are a great many people who are bewitched today. My friend, do not be bewitched by any man or his power. Even if a man is giving out the Word of God, do not look to the man. Look to the Word of God and check to see if he is presenting it accurately. Look to God. Turn to Him. When we get our eyes on man, we take our eyes off the Lord Jesus Christ. That is what had happened in Samaria. - McGee

Act 8:12 But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized.

Philip preached the gospel in Samaria, and many men and women believed. Simon came in contact with Philip, and apparently he made a profession of faith under the ministry of Philip. I believe that Simon is the first religious racketeer in the church—but, unfortunately, not the last. He professes to be a believer during the sweeping revival in Samaria under the ministry of Philip. - McGee

Act 8:13 Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.

Simon believes, he is baptized, and he becomes a friend of Philip. You would certainly think he was a real child of God. However, he is not converted. We will see that there are also others who are professing believers, but they are not born again. They have the head knowledge, they go along with the crowd, but they are not saved. Although they have been baptized with water, they have not been baptized into the church of Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit.

There are a great many people like that today. I receive many letters from people who have told me that since they have been studying the Bible along with our program, they have begun to examine their faith. Many have come to realize that they have just been following along with someone else and that they have not been genuinely, personally converted. Paul says, “Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves ...” (2Co_13:5). It is a very good thing to check yourself. See whether you are in the faith or not.

This man Simon had all the outward trappings. He answered that he did believe in Jesus, and so he was baptized. But it was not a genuine faith. – McGee

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Act 8:14-16 Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

When the apostles heard that there was a great moving of the Spirit down in Samaria, they sent Peter and John to check on it. They found a great company of professing believers who had not been born again. They had not been baptized into the church by the Holy Spirit. They were not saved. They had gone through an outward ceremony.

My friend, being baptized with water or going through some other ceremony will not make you a Christian. This gives the background to explain why Simon was able to put over his racket on the others. He liked this idea of performing miracles. - McGee

Act 8:17 Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

It may be that Philip had not told all the facts and conditions of the gospel. It may be that they had not accepted them. At any rate, now they are brought into partnership with the apostles. Now they believe the gospel and they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Now the Spirit of God has entered into them. I think this needs to be considered in its historical setting. It was the commission given to the apostles to open up each new area to the gospel. On the Day of Pentecost the gospel was given in Jerusalem. Peter and John are to bring it into Samaria and Judea. Paul is to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Jesus had given this commission. We are now seeing it fulfilled here in Samaria. - McGee

Act 8:18-19 And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, saying, "Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

Simon wanted to pay for the gift. Why? Well, because this man is a religious racketeer. He wants to use it for profit.

How many such claims are made by individuals today! They claim that great miracles take place in their meetings and humbly say they have nothing to do with them. If that is so, why do they permit this type of deception to go on? Bewitch is the word used here. There have been religious racketeers around bewitching the multitudes from that day to this.

Persecution from the outside didn't hurt the church. It scattered the believers and actually worked for the furtherance of the gospel. What hurt the church was that people got on the inside, professing to be believers when they were not believers. Always the church is hurt from the inside.

It was the same with the Lord Jesus. He was betrayed from the inside. He was betrayed to His nation by one of His own disciples. His own nation betrayed Him to the Roman Empire, and the Roman Empire crucified Him. Also today He is betrayed within the church.

It is like the wooden horse brought into the city of Troy. The city was impenetrable, it was invulnerable, until that wooden horse got on the inside. The Devil started out by persecuting the church, fighting it from the outside. He found that didn't work. It just spread the gospel. Then He decided to start his work

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from the inside. That is where he can get in and do damage. How many pastors could testify to that today! - McGee

Act 8:20-21 *But Peter said to him, "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God."*

Simon the sorcerer was deeply impressed by the fact that the Holy Spirit was given when the apostles laid their hands on the Samaritans. He had no deep sense of the spiritual implications of this, but rather looked on it as a supernatural power which would serve him well in his trade. So he offered money to the apostles in an effort to buy the power.

Peter's answer indicates that Simon was not a truly converted man:

1. "Your money perish with you." No believer will ever perish (Joh_3:16).
2. "You have neither part nor portion in this matter"; in other words, he was not in the fellowship.
3. "Your heart is not right in the sight of God." This is a fitting description of an unsaved person.
4. "You are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity." Could these words be true of a regenerate person? – Believers Bible Commentary

The traits of a false Christianity. Even in the true Church, and in its purest days, there was to be found a Simon the sorcerer.

1. The false Christianity is often concealed under the formal rites of the Church service. Outwardly Simon was a baptised member, inwardly he was a hypocrite.
2. It is revealed in the spiritual manifestations of the Church. When the Holy Ghost descends, Simon is at once detected.
3. Its spirit is that of selfish ambition, seeking for power over men rather than power with God.
4. It should be dealt with promptly, rebuked unsparingly, and should find no countenance in the Church.
5. It may find mercy and forgiveness if the false disciple will seek the Lord. – Biblical Illustrator

Act 8:22-24 *Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity." Then Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me."*

Peter urged Simon to repent of his great sin, and pray that his wicked plan might be forgiven. Simon's reply was to ask Peter to serve as a mediator between God and himself. He was the forerunner of those who would rather go to a human mediator than to the Lord Himself. That there was no true repentance on Simon's part is indicated by the words, "Pray to the Lord for me, that none of these things which you

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have spoken may come upon me.” He was not sorry for his sin, but only for the consequences which it might bring on him.

It is from this man, Simon, that we get the modern word, “simony”—making a business out of that which is sacred. It includes the sale of indulgences and other supposed spiritual benefits, and all forms of commercialism in divine matters. – Believers Bible Commentary

Act 8:25 So when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans.

The gospel is starting its journey to the ends of the earth. It started in Jerusalem. The apostles were there and a church was established. Soon the center will move to Antioch. Then it will move to Ephesus. Later it will move to Alexandria, then to Rome. Today, I don't think there is any particular center of the church. It has gone to the ends of the earth.

I believe that one of the finest vehicles to get the gospel to the ends of the earth is radio. Through this mechanical means the church can do what has not been accomplished since the first century when the gospel did penetrate to all the known world. – McGee

PHILIP AND THE ETHIOPIAN

In chapters 8, 9, and 10 we find the record of three remarkable instances of conversion. I think that these three have been lifted out and given to us particularly for a lesson. Chapter 8 gives the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, a son of Ham. Chapter 9 gives the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, a son of Shem. Chapter 10 gives the conversion of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, a son of Japheth. You will recall that the entire human family is divided into these three categories. This was an ethnological and a geographical division made after the Flood. Ham, Shem, and Japheth were the sons of Noah. We find here that the gospel reaches out to representatives of these three divisions of the human family.

You will also notice from these examples that in a conversion three factors must be brought into focus before there can be a conversion. All three of these are evident in these three representative conversions.

1. The work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had taken this man Philip to Samaria where there had been a great moving of the Spirit of God. Then the Holy Spirit moved him down to Gaza, and again we see His moving in the heart of the Ethiopian eunuch. The Spirit of God had gone ahead to prepare the heart and also to prepare the messenger. This leading of the Spirit of God is absolutely essential. I'm afraid that a great deal of personal work is done in a haphazard manner and without the leading of the Spirit of God. I believe that we ought to make it a matter of definite prayer before we talk to anyone. We should talk to the Lord about the individual before we talk to the individual about the Lord. It is not simply that we need the Holy Spirit to lead us. What we need is for the Spirit of God to go ahead of us and prepare the way, then to call us up to where He is. We want to go where the Spirit of God is moving. This is the first essential in a conversion. We find it true in the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch and also in the conversion of Saul and of Cornelius.

2. The Word of God. “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom_10:17). The Word of God is the second essential. The Holy Spirit will take the things of Christ and will reveal

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them to an individual. It is the Spirit of God using the Word of God. But, wait a minute, there must be a human instrument.

3. The man of God. The Spirit of God uses the man of God who delivers the Word of God to produce a son of God, one who is born again. We will see this in the record of the conversion of this Ethiopian eunuch.

The second part of chapter 8 brings us to another part of the ministry of Philip. The gospel had gone to Samaria, and there were many genuine believers. But we also saw that in Samaria evil came into the church in the person of Simon the sorcerer. Now, in contrast to Simon the sorcerer, we come to the experience of Philip with a eunuch from Ethiopia. Philip led this man to Christ, and he became a genuine believer, a wonderful man of God. - McGee

Act 8:26 Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is desert.

Samaria is an area which lies north of Jerusalem. Now Philip is told to go way down to the south. What we know as the Gaza strip is south, over along the Mediterranean. This was the trade route down into Egypt and Ethiopia. He would probably travel through Jerusalem to get there.

Philip had been speaking to multitudes in Samaria, and now he is sent down to a desert. He is to leave the place where there has been a great moving of the Spirit of God and go into a place, a desert, where there is nobody. However, when he gets there, he finds that God does have someone to whom he is to witness. - McGee

Act 8:27-28 So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet.

We read here that this man of Ethiopia had charge of all the treasure of the queen. He was actually the Secretary of the Treasury. He was an official, and a high official of that day. This man was not traveling alone. He had a great retinue of servants and minor officials with him. He wasn't sitting in a chariot with the reins in one hand and a book in the other hand as we see him pictured. This man was sitting back in a chariot, protected from the sun by a canopy. He had a private chauffeur and was riding in style.

He was a citizen of Ethiopia, but he had come to Jerusalem to worship. This indicates that he was a proselyte to Judaism. He had just been to Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish religion. Although Judaism was the God-given religion, he was leaving the city still in the dark. He was reading the prophet Isaiah, but he was not understanding what he was reading. - McGee

Act 8:29-30 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go near and overtake this chariot." So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

The Holy Spirit is leading, as He must in any conversion. Philip is the man of God whom the Spirit of God is using. The Word of God is already in that chariot, for the Ethiopian is reading from the prophet Isaiah.

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Philip is a hitchhiker. When he hears what the man is reading, he asks, “Do you understand what you are reading there?” The Ethiopian doesn't; so he stops his retinue and invites Philip to come up and ride with him.

Act 8:31-33 And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him. The place in the Scripture which he read was this: "HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO THE SLAUGHTER; AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT, SO HE OPENED NOT HIS MOUTH. IN HIS HUMILIATION HIS JUSTICE WAS TAKEN AWAY, AND WHO WILL DECLARE HIS GENERATION? FOR HIS LIFE IS TAKEN FROM THE EARTH."

Where was he reading? You will recognize that this is from the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah. He was reading the seventh and eighth verses. It is obvious that he must have been reading for some time. So it is also obvious that he must have read the preceding verses: “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. 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” (Isa_53:3-6). - McGee

Act 8:34-35 So the eunuch answered Philip and said, "I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?" Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him.

The Holy Spirit will use the Word of God.

I do not believe that people can be converted by hearing a song. The song may affect a person emotionally and influence the will to make a decision for Christ. However, if the Word of God is not in it, there can be no true conversion. It requires the Word of God. How important that is!

Simon Peter, whom God used so wonderfully in the conversion of multitudes, makes it very clear that the Word of God must be involved if a person is saved. He wrote in his first epistle: “Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you” (1Pe_1:23-25).

When the Spirit of God uses the Word of God, what is going to happen? These men were in the chariot, discussing the Word of God. Philip was telling the eunuch about Jesus. - McGee

Act 8:36-37 Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?" Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

Remember that Philip had had an experience with Simon the sorcerer up there in Samaria. He is not about to have a repetition of that. When this man asks for water baptism, Philip wants to be very sure that he believes with all his heart. - McGee

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Act 8:38-39 So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing.

Philip is snatched off the page of Scripture. He is not needed here anymore. The Ethiopian rides off the pages of Scripture in his chariot. He went on his way, rejoicing. Now what about this man? The first great church was not in the United States, nor was it in Europe, nor was it in Jerusalem, nor was it in Asia Minor. The first great church was in northern Africa. The Ethiopian evidently went back and through his witness and his influence, a church was begun there. You would find it very profitable to read about the early church in North Africa. - McGee

Act 8:40 But Philip was found at Azotus. And passing through, he preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea.

Azotus is Ashdod, which is over in the Gaza strip. To reach Caesarea, he would have gone through Joppa. Tel Aviv is there today. So he went, preaching the gospel along the coast up to Caesarea. The gospel has gone to Judea and to Samaria and is moving out. The eunuch has carried it down to Ethiopia. Philip is carrying it along the coast to Caesarea.