



The Gospel comes to Samaria

Acts 8:1-24

Chapter eight is very important for our understanding of the book of Acts. The beginning of this chapter records that Saul of Tarsus, though not the instigator of the death of Stephen, was nevertheless in complete agreement with it. This is the man of whom much will be said later. Here is an indication of the long road he must travel before he becomes the fit instrument for the Spirit's use in bringing many to faith in the Lord. The rather cursory remarks which Luke makes about Saul all serve to give us a full picture of what the Spirit of God is able to accomplish in the heart of a man. Saul found delight in the death of Stephen and will later seek to bring many more to the same condemnation.

Devout men buried Stephen and lamented his death. It must seem to these early Christians that God is seeking to thwart His own purposes. Why does He allow such a foul deed to happen? The church had need of men of the caliber of Stephen. There are never many such people.

Persecution spreads the Gospel

By the persecution that began with the death of Stephen the believers are now scattered outside of Jerusalem. The authorities are not going to be satisfied with the death of this one man, they will seek out many more. Faith is now going to be put to the test. People will have to leave homes and fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, sons, and daughters for the sake of the gospel. Is it not strange that there was not this kind of scattering after the death of Christ, but now, after the death of Stephen the people are not left alone? The answer is rather simple — upon the death of Jesus there was *no church!* Only a handful of people clung to His teaching. That posed no threat. Now, when the number of believers was counted in thousands, the threat is not imaginary. But, the agenda which Jesus had given the Apostles in Acts 1:8 is slowly being fulfilled. Those who are scattered abroad do not behave in a passive manner — they go everywhere preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is indeed true that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. This was shown after this first martyrdom.

It is also strange that the Apostles were not scattered abroad. One would think that these would be the first to be forced to leave. This is, however, not the case. There still remained a church in Jerusalem, and the Apostles ministered to this church. No doubt, they were in hiding, but they stayed in the capital of the Jews.

Once more we read of Saul. As a wild man, he seeks to lay waste the church of Christ! He seems to have obtained authority to go into the homes of people and drag them to prison. Saul is not a citizen of Laodicea! He goes to all lengths to do those things which he considers to be right.

Philip preaches in Samaria

One of those who has been forced to flee Jerusalem is the deacon and evangelist, Philip. He comes to a city in Samaria and there preaches Christ. This is the message of the gospel. It has a Person as its subject. He is not able to carry on his task of "waiting on tables" in Jerusalem any longer, and now he does a far greater work in proclaiming the gospel. No doubt, he was an evangelist before he had been appointed a deacon. The history of the church has not yet developed to the stage in which a clear differentiation is made between the offices in the church. This becomes clearer in the later books of the New Testament, such as the letters to Timothy. But,

it is clear that the death of one deacon has led to the fleeing of another deacon to Samaria where he may proclaim the good news of salvation. Luke later tells us that Paul stayed with Philip (Acts 21:8).

Is the work of Philip approved by God? He finds phenomenal success. He preaches boldly and the Lord gives him the power to do miracles so that evil spirits come out of those possessed by them, and the palsied and the lame were healed. It is almost as though we were back in the days in which Jesus was here on earth. When the name of Christ truly goes forth in the preaching of the word, great things happen. Because the people have heard the gospel and see the accompanying signs, they rejoice!

Encounter with Simon

The manner in which the gospel was received in Samaria gives promise of great things to come. However, does the gospel ever have smooth sailing? It seems as though there are always difficulties to surmount. Samaria was no exception. There is a man in this city who has exerted tremendous influence before Philip came. He was a sorcerer, a wizard, who received his power from evil spirits. This man had a wide following because he also did marvelous signs in the city. How is it possible that the Lord allows such men to mislead the people? How is it possible that they are able to do miracles? This is by no means the only time that this phenomenon is referred to in the Bible. Jesus says: *"If I cast out demons by the prince of demons, then by whom do your sons cast them out?"* In other words, they cast them out too. Moses and Aaron do great miracles before Pharaoh in Egypt, but the magicians are able to do some of them too. This Simon the sorcerer gave the impression to the people that he was indeed a great man. Is there here, perhaps, an allusion to the fact that the Samaritans also looked for a Messiah and that this man gave the impression that he was the one? All the people had followed him and proclaimed that *"This man is that power of God which is called Great!"* His influence has long been great in this city. More and more, the people follow him as his success breeds more success.

True and false conversions

With the coming of Philip, things change. Simon might be able to do signs; he was not able to give the good news of salvation. The people left him and followed Philip instead. It is now added that beside the preaching of the name of Jesus Christ, he also preached about the kingdom of God. Salvation?, most assuredly. But, this salvation brings certain responsibilities. Every part of life must be subjected to the true King of our lives. The people believed this preaching and were then baptized. Even Simon the sorcerer is baptized. It seems that he cannot get enough of the teaching of Philip, because he clings to him, amazed at the miracles performed by Philip. Evidently these miracles are different from those he has performed.

The next paragraph offers many problems, but is also of great significance to the church of later ages. The tidings of what has happened in Samaria comes to Jerusalem. The church sends Peter and John. Must these men do something which Philip could not do? They come to investigate. These two Apostles pray for the believers here in Samaria that the Holy Spirit may be given them. These believers have not yet received the Spirit but have only been baptized into the name of Jesus. When the two Apostles lay their hands on them, they receive the Spirit.

Various questions rise. How could they believe without having received the Holy Spirit? How could they be allowed to receive baptism without having received the Spirit? Is the preaching of a Philip only preparatory and does it not really have the authority of the preaching of the Apostles? These are legitimate questions and must be faced. By their words they must have indicated to Philip that they believed and that they were therefore fit candidates for baptism. It seems that the gift of the Spirit, in the sense of Pentecost, could only come through the Apostles. Christ had entrusted the disciples with the planting of the church. The laying on of hands was not always found (cf. Acts 10 on Cornelius). We must be careful that we do not make normative what is here only given us as a true account of this episode.

Remember, Simon has also been baptized. He had "believed." But, his was not the genuine faith. He sees that the people have received the Spirit through the laying on of hands by the Apostles. How he can see this is not said. There may have been some of the wonders again which also accompanied the coming of the Spirit on Pentecost. This looks good to him. If he only had the power to give this to people! He will pay for that power and will then later charge those to whom he has given the Spirit. To Simon it becomes a business deal. From his name and his actions we have received the term "simony," which means to traffic in that which is sacred. It is incredible that a man who has heard Philip and the two Apostles and has seen what they have done should make such a proposal! The whole idea is preposterous.

Simon is the kind of man who has seen true faith, knows about it, wonders at it, but does not possess it. These are sad cases.

Peter condemns him roundly. Both he and his money will perish. He has no part in the kingdom of God. His heart is not right with God. May Peter judge the heart? Of course — *"by their fruits ye shall know them."* He tells him to repent. How does one do that without having the Spirit of God? Don't let theology get in the way of a perfectly normal command. *"You are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity!"* Your sin is indescribable! It is horrible. Pray for forgiveness — *perhaps* it will be forgiven. Why the "perhaps"? Peter does not know whether there is forgiveness for a sin such as this! Is it not against the Spirit?

Simon does not pray for himself but asks that the Apostles pray for him so that he may not receive his due punishment.

Peter had dealt differently with Ananias and Sapphira. But, remember, those were of the house of Israel, while Simon is out of heathendom.

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Questions for discussion:

1. Was the flight of believers from Jerusalem a blessing for the church?
2. Do the Apostles do right by staying in Jerusalem?
3. Is the missionary work now taken out of the hands of the twelve?
4. Does the fact that Philip was both a deacon and evangelist have anything to say to us?
5. Was Philip's preaching and baptizing adequate? Why did the Apostles have to come?
6. Was it a great advantage to the church that one like Simon joined them?
7. In how far should religious services be "paid for"? Is "simony" still a danger?