

Acts The Gospel on the Move

Study 8

Persecution and Church Growth

Acts 8

A. Persecution Enabled Missions

Acts 8:1-8 (NIV)

And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in 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 both 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 Messiah there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city.

1. a) **Reflection Question.** If someone like Saul (who later became Apostle Paul) exists today, dragging Christians to prison, would you think God is able to use that person one day?

b) **Discussion Question.** Philip went into the city and not rural areas to proclaim Jesus. Why is evangelizing in the city (urban missions) important?

b) **Objective Question.** Select the best answer. According to the video lecture, what is the relationship between social action and evangelism?

A. Social action should lead to evangelism, to bring about people to faith (No, because this is manipulation, the motive is not to help the community but to enlarge the church, and produce rice Christians)

B. Social action and evangelism should be separate but equal. (No, social action cannot stand on its own because social help is temporal good whereas gospel help is eternal good for the person)

C. Social action and evangelism should be inseparable because we are ministering to the whole person (James 2:14-17)

Quick Verse Reference

James 2:14-17 (NIV)

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

B. The Gospel and the True Faith (The Problem with Simon)

Acts 8:9-25 (NIV)

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, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is rightly called the Great Power of God." They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery. 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. Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

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

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

Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. 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. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."

Then Simon answered, "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me."

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.

2. a) Discussion Question. It seems that Simon believed and was baptized. Does it mean he had genuine faith?

b) Reflection Question. It seems that Simon's case was not hopeless since Apostle Peter offered for him to repent and Simon requested for prayer. Would you ask for prayer if someone points out that your heart is not right before God?

c) Discussion Question. According to Apostle Peter, the issue with Simon the Sorcerer is that he is "full of bitterness and captive to sin". Refer to Deuteronomy 29:18-20 and explain what this means.

Quick Verse Reference

Deuteronomy 29:18-20 (NIV)

Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the Lord our God to go and worship the gods of those nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison.

When such a person hears the words of this oath and they invoke a blessing on themselves, thinking, "I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way," they will bring disaster on the watered land as well as the dry. The Lord will never be willing to forgive them; his wrath and zeal will burn against them. All the curses written in this book will fall on them, and the Lord will blot out their names from under heaven.

d) Discussion Question. "Laying of hands to receive Spirit" is mentioned here in Acts 8 and 19 when someone believes, but it's not mentioned in Acts 2 or 10

when people believed. What is the best explanation for such differences offered by John Stott?

There was racial discrimination against Samaritans by the Jews where the Samaritans were treated as outcasts. So since they are ministering to the Samaritans, laying hands on the Samaritans implies Solidarity and Authenticity to apostles as well as Samaritans. It's a racial reconciliation between the two. John Stott suggests: "If God had not withheld his Spirit until the Jerusalem apostles came, converts on both sides of the cultural barrier might have found Christ without finding each other."

C. The Gospel and Racial Diversity (The Ethiopian Eunuch)

Acts 8:26-40 (NIV)

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian 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, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

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

"How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

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.
In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.
Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth."

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

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?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. 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. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

3. a) Reflection Question. After the chapter on reconciliation with the Samaritan race, we come to a chapter on another ethnic group, the Ethiopians. The gospel is for all, but can you see yourself behaving like Philip in walking up to a stranger of a different race to talk about the Bible/God?

b) Reflection Question. Both eunuchs and barren women cannot have kids, yet there are Bible verses to comfort them (Isaiah 54 for barren women and Isaiah 56 for eunuchs). It’s amazing how God recognizes this group of people and identifies with their pain. It might explain how this eunuch is drawn to worship this God. Do you think you are able to comfort this group of people today?

Quick Verse Reference

Isaiah 56:3-5

Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say,
“The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.”
And let no eunuch complain,
“I am only a dry tree.”

For this is what the Lord says:

“To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose what pleases me
and hold fast to my covenant—
to them I will give within my temple and its walls
a memorial and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that will endure forever.

c) Discussion Question. What would Malaysia look like if more and more people believed in the Gospel regardless of race and status?

d) Reflection Question. In the video lecture, it was mentioned that in 300 AD, probably a chain effect from the Ethiopian eunuch, Ethiopia was the second nation to be almost all Christian. Even today a majority are still Christians, all this because one man (Philip) is used by God to explain the gospel to one person. Do you think what you can do (through the gospel) is too small to make a difference and why?

Relevant Quotes

“When people speak of traveling to the past, they worry about radically changing the present by doing something small, but barely anyone in the present thinks they can radically change the future by doing something small.”

— **Barbara R. Nelson**

Takeaway

In Acts 8, we are introduced to Saul (who later becomes Apostle Paul but is currently a persecutor of the early Christians. We see that Stephen’s death and martyrdom had a domino effect of causing Christianity to spread outwards. We also see that Christianity is spread to other races, first Samaritans and then an Ethiopian eunuch.

Case Study

Case 1 – Hypergrace VS Legalism

Abby attends a Baptist church that often preaches once saved, always saved. She is confident that Jesus will forgive her no matter what. So she says she is a Christian and is confident of her salvation. However, she does not let God and the Bible transform her from the inside out. She says everyone is a sinner anyway when someone points out her sin. She does not repent of the specific sins in her life that people have pointed out to her.

Cristal attends a non-denominational church that believes that one can backslide from

God. They often have an altar call after each service to pray for those who backslide from God. Cristal is very unsure of her salvation. If you ask her if she is saved, she says she hopes so and has no confidence that she won't backslide at the last minute before death.

Evan attends a Reformed church. He thinks that many other churches don't take the Bible and its moral teachings seriously. He thinks only his church has got it right. They take the Bible seriously and have an exposition on it for hours every Sunday. He believes the other churches are sinning because they don't take the Bible seriously enough.

1. a) Discussion question. What is the root cause of these disagreements?

b) Discussion question. Have you met people who are like that?

c) Discussion question. Can you relate with either Abby, Cristal, or Evan?

d) Discussion question. Among Abby, Cristal, or Evan who believes in salvation by works?

e) Discussion question. If you meet Abby, Cristal, or Evan at a Christian conference, what would you say to them as a sister/brother in Christ?

i) Abby

ii) Cristal

iii) Evan