

# Study 11: Acts chapter 8

After spending the latter parts of Chapter 6 and all of Chapter 7 on Stephen, Luke now moves to the events associated with another of the 7 deacons – Philip.

## ***Introduction***

***Timing:***            *When did these events occur?*

***Content:***           *What are the major events?*

***Cast:***              *Who are the major players?*

## ***Body of the Study***

**How does Saul regard Stephen's sentence?**

**How did the disciples react to this persecution?**

**Why did the Apostles remain in Jerusalem?**

**Where does Philip go, and what does he do?**

**Why was there "great joy in the city"?**

**How did Simon promote himself amongst the people?**

**How does Simon react to Philip and the miracles?**

**Why does the church at Jerusalem send two apostles?**

**What is Simon's reaction to all of this?**

**Philip and the Eunuch**

**How did Philip approach the Eunuch with the gospel?**

**What happened to Philip?**

## **Homework:**

*Read the notes as a review of the study.*

*Read chapter 9 in preparation for the next study.*

- *Who were the Samaritans, and how did they differ from the Jews? (Jn 4:9)*
- *How would the Eunuch have viewed his conversion experience? (He would have known nothing of the Holy Spirit directing Philip to him)*
- *What was the action of the Holy Spirit in the Eunuch's conversion (more on this in a later study)*

# Notes for study 11: Acts chapter 8

## *Introduction*

After spending the latter parts of Chapter 6 and all of Chapter 7 on Stephen, Luke moves on to the events associated with another of the 7 deacons – Philip.

To this point, the church had seen some opposition, and had grown stronger as a result. But with the Stoning of Stephen, the level of opposition moved up several notches, as one of the Christians had actually been put to death. And then Saul arrives, lifting the game several notches higher again!

Whilst the church had grown together, and continued “growing and growing”, it was not sustainable. There was a limit to how long people could keep “...selling their land and bringing the money to the apostles...” (4:34). The dispersion had a dramatic effect on the church. Rather than just being centred in Jerusalem, the gospel spread to the rest of the world.

This begins the second section of the book of Acts – **the work in Judea and Samaria**.

## **Timing:**      *When did these events occur?*

These events follow directly on behind chapters 6 and 7, which places the time at late AD33, to early AD34. The conversion of the Eunuch also confirms this with the most likely times being October AD33 or April AD44.

## **Content:**      *What are the major events?*

Stephen’s burial; Saul makes havoc of the church. Disciples (except the Apostles) are scattered spreading the word. Philip in Samaria – worked miracles. Simon the Sorcerer baptised. Apostles came to Samaria to pass on Holy Spirit. Simon tried to buy gift of Holy Spirit. Eunuch baptised.

## **Cast:**            *Who are the major players?*

Saul, Philip, Simon the Sorcerer, Ethiopian Eunuch.

## **Body of the Study**

### **How does Saul regard Stephen’s sentence?**

As we are going to see over the next two studies, Saul was a very dedicated Jew who was absolutely convinced that the Jews held the position of God’s people. Consequently he believed that the sentence carried out on Stephen was exactly what should have been done for such a breach of the Law of Moses. (Duet 13: 7-10)

Saul may have been witness to the events of Stephen’s trial, and he certainly was to his execution. He began making havoc of the church. He would go into houses with a reputation as being places where christians were living or staying. The language gives the connotations of a house to house search. He had authority from the chief priests for such action (26:10), and would drag off the people and put them in prison.

Until relatively recent times, women and children were exempt from war and violence. However Saul’s action shows his vigour and bitterness towards the disciples, as he violently takes women and throws them into prison along with the men.

They were thrown into prison because they were awaiting sentence (not because they had already been sentenced). The usual action was to throw the culprits into prison to await trial, and then they would either be acquitted and let go, or beaten and let go, or executed. There is

no doubt about Saul's (and the chief priests) intentions for any of the disciples that could be rounded up.

### ***How did the disciples react to this persecution?***

These people had come from all over the (then known) world to Jerusalem for (initially) Passover and then Pentecost. After being converted to christianity, they could hardly return home – and so they stayed with their new spiritual family in Jerusalem where they would receive the spiritual food that they needed to help them in their growth.

The problem was, how would they survive and continue to live? They also needed physical food. Metaphorically, they had reached the “credit limit” on their AMEX cards. They had come prepared to stay for around two to three months, but had now been here for six months to a year. We have already noted in study 5 that this was the reason why the disciples sold their houses and brought the money to the apostles to distribute (p. 30).

Rather than being together and encouraged, they were being persecuted. So why hang around to get thrown into jail, beaten up, and maybe killed? A very strong reason arose for them to leave. So they fled, and many of them (most likely) went back to their homes again. Although, the verse **does not say** that the people all went back to their homes in the rest of the world, but that “...*they were all scattered throughout Judea and Samaria...*” (8:1).

It is likely therefore that at the first instance of the scattering, those from Judea and Samaria returned home and took some others from further abroad with them. They could then still stay together for encouragement, whilst being safe from persecution (at least for now!).

This event is a key turning point in the book of Acts. Luke makes several references to it throughout the book (eg 11:19 – itself another key verse in Acts).

When they were scattered, they “...*went everywhere preaching the word...*” (8:4) The opportunity to flee also provided the opportunity to take the word with them and spread it. The Greek word is “*evangelising*”. As they went, they could explain the bad news of the reason for their flight, and the good news of the reason for their hope!

The Jewish leaders attempting to bring the new faith to an end had the opposite effect, and provided a wider circle for it to take effect.

### ***Why did the Apostles remain in Jerusalem?***

Whilst the answer to this question is not revealed in scripture, we may observe that for much of the history of the New Testament, the apostles remained in and around Jerusalem.

There are several theories as to why this might be. One early tradition (recorded by Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius) is that the Lord had commanded the apostles to remain in Jerusalem to witness to the Jews for a period of 12 years. This would take away any excuse for the Jews to say that they had not heard the gospel, and also show the solidarity of the apostle's faith, lest any should say that they had denied their new faith, fled and forsaken God. This is absolutely consistent with Gamaliel who said “...*leave it alone and see what it comes to...*” (5:38). However it is not consistent with Acts 10 when Peter was in Joppa, although we are not told why or for how long he was there.

### ***Where does Philip go, and what does he do?***

Philip went down to Samaria. Some versions read to **the** city of Samaria, and some to **a** city of Samaria. This variance is due to the absence of the definite article in some manuscripts (MSS), whilst it is present in others. The Codex Sinaiticus, the Codex Alexandrinus, and the Codex Vaticanus all have the definite article. On the other hand, the city known as Samaria in the Old Testament had been renamed by Herod the Great as *Sebaste*. It would seem strange for Luke to write describing it by its former name if that was the city that he had in mind, rather than just **a** city of Samaria. “...*and he preached Christ to them...*” (8:5)

“...When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said...” (8:6 NIV)

Notice very carefully what Luke says here. When they **saw** the miracles, then they **listened** to what he had to say. Jesus said in Mk 16:20 that “...the disciples went preaching everywhere, and **confirmed the word** with the signs that followed...” after them. Here we have an exact example of that in action. The crowds had heard Philip speaking, and at first he would have little more credibility than anyone else standing on a soapbox in the marketplace. Then came the miracles. Now, this was no ordinary man – we had better listen to what he has to say!

We saw in chapter 6 Stephen working miracles (after he had received the miraculous gift through the laying on of the hands of the apostles), and now we see the same demonstration by Philip, who also received the gift at the same time. (More on this later in this chapter).

Luke gives us a brief description of the demonstration of the miracles that Philip was performing:

- *Unclean spirits came out of demon possessed people with a loud voice* (thereby demonstrating for all to see, that the miracle had in fact been performed),
- *Many paralysed and lame were healed.*

Notice that Luke makes a distinction between people’s physical infirmities and demon possession. This clearly identifies demon possession as something different than a physical infirmity. We will note this further in a separate study shortly.

### **Why was there “great joy in the city”?**

The context sets the answer for us. The people who had been lame and unable to walk were now healed. Those paralysed regained the use of their limbs. Many had been stricken with demon possession, and were now freed. They were not only free from the possession, but the community was freed from the consequences that these illnesses brought on them.

Added to this of course, is the rejoicing of the people because their sins were forgiven.

### **How did Simon promote himself amongst the people?**

He claimed that he was a great person with special magical powers. By using magic tricks he would “...astonish the people...” (8:9). This was not just a simple magic trick show, but “...he used sorcery...” to perform them. The clear implication is that he was claiming magical powers (which came from demons), and he claimed he was a chosen agent by God to be able to control these powers.

He had astonished the people for quite some time, and evidently he was very good at his “trade” (vs 11).

The people listened to Simon “...from the least to the greatest...” (8:10), attesting the great powers that he had, and they believed that “...This man is the great power of God...” (8:10 NKJV).

### **How does Simon react to Philip and the miracles?**

The people had believed and obeyed the gospel. Notice Luke’s words: “...But **when they believed** Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, **they were baptized**, both men and women...” (8:12 NIV). Luke gives no thought of the people believing now, and being baptized later! Their baptism was the immediate response to their belief – their obedience to the command of God (Mk 16:16, Mt 28:19, Acts 2:38).

“...Simon also believed and ... was baptized...” (8:13), and he then begins hanging around with Philip. Luke explains the reason for this, and says that he “...was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.” (NKJV). Clearly, Simon is hooked on the special (apparently to him) magic tricks that Philip was doing, and he wants to find out how he does them. But unlike Simon’s tricks, Philip was able to do greater things.

Simon had lost his position of power amongst the people, and we will shortly see what he tries to do to get this power back again.

### ***Why does the church at Jerusalem send two apostles?***

The church had been established in Samaria, and was still very much in its infancy. It needed to establish leadership. Philip had been teaching and preaching, and had been demonstrating that what he had to say was from God by the miracles that he was able to perform. We need to remember that Philip was not the only one who had come from Jerusalem with the dispersion, but was (most likely) the only one who had the ability to work miracles. It is only a few weeks (or at the most months) since the seven were appointed, and they were the first (that we know about) who had the miraculous gifts apart from the apostles.

The apostles recognised that the church in Samaria needed to have more than just Philip to guide and teach them. So they sent two apostles – Peter and John. Luke’s language is that almost as soon as they arrive, they bestow the spiritual gifts. It is not the apostles coming down to spend a few weeks, or a few months, or a year or two working here. “...*When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit...*” (8:15 NIV).

The granting of the gifts was not at the discretion of the apostles, although their hands were the medium through which the gifts were delivered. So they prayed that the Samaritan Christians might receive the Holy Spirit. The context of “the Holy Spirit” here is the miraculous gifts, since all had received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit when they were immersed into Christ (Acts 2:38).

A notable question to ask here is, “Why didn’t Philip give them the gifts?”, and the answer is that whilst Philip had the gifts himself, and was able to exercise their powers, it was only the apostles who were able to pass on the gifts to others. Consequently, two apostles (although one would have been enough) were sent down from Jerusalem. “...*Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit...*” (8:17 NIV). The next verse makes this explicitly clear: “...*When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money...*” (8:18 NIV).

Philip could not do it, because he was not an apostle, hence the need to send Peter and John.

We should note that there was a physical manifestation of the imparting of the Holy Spirit, because “...*Simon saw that...*” He was able to discern the receiving of the Spirit. It was something extraordinary and visible.

### ***What is Simon’s reaction to all of this?***

Simon perceived (so he thought) that could acquire greater magical power, and be able to emulate the powerful “magic tricks” that Philip was performing. He thought that this would enable him to regain his position of power amongst the Samaritan people.

His response to this shows that he did not receive the spiritual gifts, and thus not everyone in the church at Samaria received them. We further note that we are only told about seven in the church at Jerusalem – when the congregation was made up of thousands – for seven was enough to fulfil the work that God had purposed the gifts to achieve.

Simon’s heart was not right with God (8:21). He was not looking for the gifts to accomplish God’s work, but *his own* works – and works which were not consistent with that of a Christian! There has been much written about Simon’s condition in the sight of God, and his previous obedience (8:13), particularly by those who take a Calvinistic position towards salvation (the so-called “once saved – always saved” position). But “...*Simon himself also believed...*” (8:13 NKJV). He was doing *exactly* what the others were doing.

He is told to repent – to change his behaviour and his attitude towards God – stop doing this wickedness – ask for God’s forgiveness – which he did (8:24).

## **Philip and the Eunuch**

“...Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip...” (8:26 NKJV). The tense follows directly after Peter and John had left to return to Jerusalem. Their mission in Samaria had been accomplished, the church had been established, leaders had been appointed, and had been endowed with the gifts that they would need to allow them to fulfil their work. It was also time for Philip to move on.

It must have taken great faith on the part of Philip to leave the flourishing church in Samaria, and go out into the desert – literally a place of no inhabitants – not a place of no water (as we tend to think of deserts today).

There are some things that we are explicitly told about the man, and some that we can infer:

- He was from Ethiopia – not the country that we now know as Ethiopia, but one to the South of Egypt, and viewed as the edge of the then known world.
- He was a eunuch. This may mean that he was a “palace official”, or it could be the more usual rendering of an emasculated (“sexually modified”) man.
- He was a high official in his country. He had great authority under the Queen Candace, and had authority over all of her treasury.
- He was a Jew (11:19), and had come to Jerusalem to worship. Further evidence of this is found in Acts chapter 10 and 11. The apostles required considerable persuasion to acknowledge that Gentiles as well as Jews should embrace christianity.
- He was not just a Jew nationally, but was interested to know about God, because he was sitting in the chariot reading the scriptures.

We have a picture of a devout religious man who had reached a high position of trust and integrity in his employment, that despite being entrusted with all of the treasury, he was given time off to go to a foreign land to worship a foreign (to Queen Candace) God.

The ancient kingdom of Ethiopia lay between Aswan and Khartoum. It was ruled by a queen mother who had the dynastic title Candace and ruled on behalf of her son the king, since the king was regarded as the child of the sun and therefore too holy to become involved in the secular functions of the state. The minister of finance in the Ethiopian government had become either a full proselyte or a Proselyte of the Gate and had gone to Jerusalem to worship at one of the Jewish festivals. (NIVBC)

It is probable that he had come to Jerusalem for one of the three great pilgrimage festivals. If so, then this would place the time at the Feast of Tabernacles in AD 33 (October), or more likely Passover / Pentecost in AD 34 (March / May).

### **How did Philip approach the Eunuch with the gospel?**

Philip started right where the Eunuch was. He was reading the book of Isaiah, but did not understand it. Here was the opening that allowed Philip to teach him. “...So Philip began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus...” (8:35).

It was indeed providential that the passage that he was reading so explicitly speaks of Jesus’ suffering. It is also (most likely) significant that the Eunuch was *returning* from Jerusalem, because the events of Jesus crucifixion and the following rise of christianity in the city and the persecution of the disciples would have still had a profound mark on the city. It is most likely that the Eunuch would have at least *heard* of Jesus whilst he was there. On the contrary, Philip’s task would have been a lot more difficult if the Eunuch was travelling *towards* Jerusalem, and had not been acquainted with Jesus – at least by reputation.

In “*preaching Jesus*” Philip must have taught the Eunuch about baptism, since the Eunuch was the one who asked why he could not be baptised right here and now. Philip replies “...*If you believe with all your heart, you may.*” And he answered and said, “*I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God...*” (8:37 NKJV).

Verse 37 is missing in some translations (such as the NIV), as it does not appear in the earlier manuscripts. Whilst it may be absent, it is quite consistent with other New Testament passages on salvation and conversion. Philip would hardly stop and immerse a man into Christ (Gal 3:27) who did not believe in Him. Nor would the Eunuch be willing to undergo such immersion.

*"...Both Philip and the Eunuch went down into the water..."* (8:38 NKJV). This passage clearly shows the mode of baptism in the New Testament. This was not sprinkling, nor did Philip stop and pour water over the Eunuch. The word "baptise" means "immerse, or dip" and that is exactly what Philip did to the Eunuch. That is why they went down into the water. *"...And when they were come up out of the water..."* (8:39 NKJV) again illustrates the point. It is significant to note that both the one being baptised and the one doing the baptising were in the water.

### ***What happened to Philip?***

Philip was *"...caught away..."* (8:39) by the Spirit of the Lord. His steps are directed in a different direction, and he went to Azotus, and then preached through many other cities. Eventually he came to Caesarea. He must have married and had a family there, and we will encounter him still there in Chapter 21 (about 20 years later).

We are told that the Spirit of the Lord "suddenly took" Philip from the scene. This verb connotes both a forceful and sudden action by the Spirit and a lack of resistance from Philip.

With our Western interest in cause-and-effect relations and our modern understanding of historiography, we would like to know more about what exactly happened between the eunuch and Philip and about their subsequent lives. Irenaeus writes that the eunuch became a missionary to the Ethiopians, though we have no way of knowing whether this is true. All that Luke tells us about the eunuch is that his conversion was a significant episode in the advance of the Gospel and that he "went on his way rejoicing." Likewise, all Luke tells us about Philip is that his early ministries in Samaria and to the eunuch were important features in the development of the Christian mission from its strictly Jewish confines to its Gentile outreach. He refers to further evangelistic activity on the part of Philip in the maritime plain of Palestine and to a final ministry at Caesarea. Later he mentions Philip and his four prophetess daughters at Caesarea in connection with Paul's last visit to Jerusalem (cf. 21:8-9). Beyond these meager references, Luke tells us nothing because he is interested in the advances of the Gospel proclamation and not in what happened after that. (NIVBC)