

14. The Gospel Goes to Judea and Samaria: Acts 8:1-25

Acts 7 found Stephen making his defense and confronting men so angry at the truth that he taught, they were clenching and gritting their teeth. Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit and saw the glory of God and Jesus at His right hand, as heaven was opened to him.

They stoned him! The antecedent of *they* are the ones before whom Stephen was defending himself in Acts 6:15: "All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel." They laid their clothes at the feet of Saul—a principal actor as Acts 8 opens. As he died, Stephen said, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Chapter 8 opens with Saul approving of Stephen's death.

The Church Persecuted and Scattered

Acts 8:1-3

And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at 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 men and women and put them in prison.

Beginning with the stoning of Stephen, a great persecution broke out against the church, led by Saul. Because of this persecution, the church was scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Even though Saul was vicious in his attack—going from house to house and putting men and women in prison—the scattering of the church worked to the good of the gospel. This persecution fulfilled the prophecy of Jesus in Acts 1:8: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Saul, the most notorious persecutor of the church, lived to regret all that he had done. Later, after becoming a Christian himself, he was defending himself before the Council in Acts 22:4-5, where he admitted that he persecuted Christians even to their death: "4 I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, 5 as also the high priest and all the Council can testify."

Even after his conversion, Paul, as Saul was then called, expressed how diminished he felt for persecuting the church. In 1 Cor 15:9 he said, "9 For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."

In Acts 8, he is the aggressive leader in the persecution of the church.

Philip in Samaria

Acts 8:4-8

4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. 5 Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. 6 When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. 7 With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. 8 So there was great joy in that city.

These early Christians, although scattered and persecuted, still went everywhere preaching the word. Philip, as Stephen, was one of the servants selected to serve tables for the Grecian widows in Acts 6. He went to a city in Samaria, where he preached the Christ. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs, they paid close attention to what he said. The signs accomplished just what Mark 16:20 said they would accomplish: "20 Then the disciples went

out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it." As in other examples of healing, the signs and miracles of Philip cured conspicuous and apparent ailments with the healing power coming from the Holy Spirit via the one performing the miracle [See Acts 3 notes].

Beginning with this trip into Samaria, Philip becomes the focal point of preaching in Acts 8 Along with Peter and John, he will dominate the spreading of the gospel throughout Judea and Samaria. The map depicts their travels in the region.

Simon the Sorcerer and His Followers Obey the Gospel

Acts 8:9-11

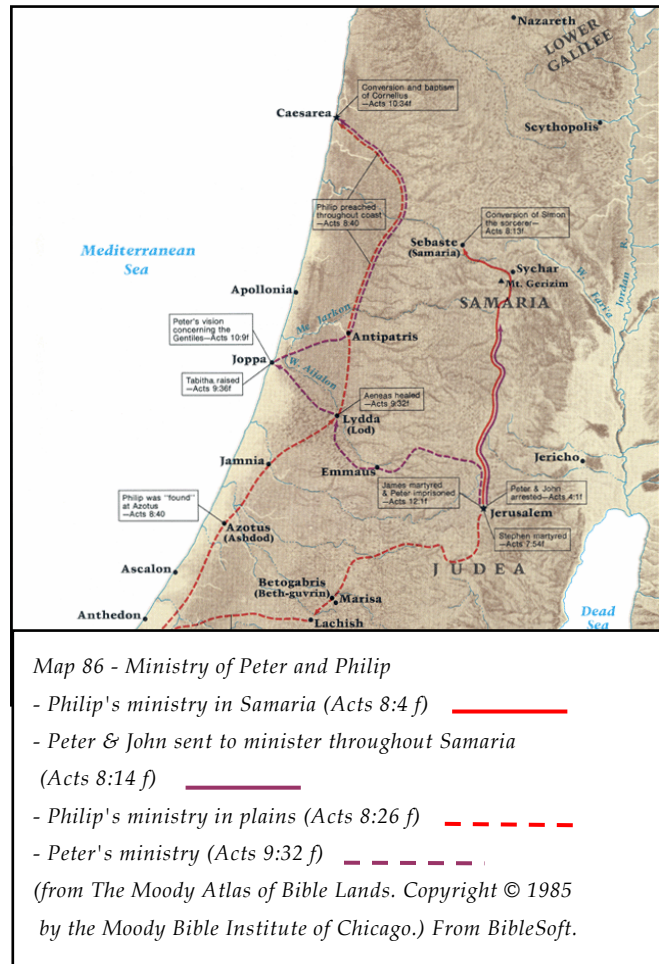
9 Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, 10 and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is the divine power known as the Great Power." 11 They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic.

Simon was a successful, practicing sorcerer who was so good that he amazed all the people, and he could boast that he was someone great. He was a sorcerer of great credibility as witnessed by the fact that all the people, high and low, gave him their attention. They thought him to be so great that they said he was the "divine power" known as the "Great Power." He had also been around for a long time. This is to illustrate that both Simon and his followers were so experienced, that they recognized the true greatness and superiority of the real God manifested in the miracles of Stephen.

Acts 8:12-13

12 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. 13 Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

With the signs and miracles confirming that Stephen was preaching the word of the true God, the Samaritans believed Philip when he preached the gospel. Having believed, they were baptized, and Simon himself believed and was baptized, fulfilling the command of Jesus when he gave the great commission in Mark 16:16, "16 Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." At this point the Samaritans, including Simon, were saved; just as the Jews were saved on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:40-41: "41 Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day." Luke described those added to their number as *being saved* in Acts



2:47: “47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

In the next passage, Luke describes how they received the power of the Holy Spirit to perform the spiritual gifts given to the early church members by the laying on of the apostles’ hands. This endowment is not to be confused with the gift of the Holy Spirit given to all penitent, baptized believers [See notes on Acts 2:38]. The gift of the Holy Spirit that comes to all Christians comes immediately upon their obeying the gospel. Eph 1:13-14 describes this gift:

13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory.

Simon Seeks to Buy the Ability to Lay on Hands

Acts 8:14-17

14 When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. 15 When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, 16 because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

When the apostles arrived, they discovered that the Samaritan Christians who had believed and obeyed in baptism the word of the Lord, had not received the Holy Spirit—not to be confused with the gift of the Holy Spirit which all obedient believers receive. The measure of the Holy Spirit spoken of here is that measure which came only by the laying on of the apostles’ hands. This measure imparted the power to perform signs and miracles, but not the power to lay hands on others and thus to pass spiritual gifts to them. This ability to impart the power of the Holy Spirit to others resided only in the apostles. The fact that this is the power that Simon seeks to buy with money proves the point.

These spiritual gifts which came only by the laying on of the apostles’ hands were evidently the measure of the Holy Spirit which resided in Philip, or else he could have endowed these Samaritans with like gifts. Instead, it took the apostles to equip the Samaritan church. Timothy is an example of another evangelist who received this measure of the Holy Spirit by the laying on of an apostle’s hands. Paul wrote Timothy in 2 Tim 1:6-7:

6 For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. 7 For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.

The kinds and duration of these spiritual gifts occupy the totality of 1Cor 12, 13, and 14.

The Kinds of Spiritual Gifts in the Early Church

1 Cor 12:4-11 lists and describes the spiritual gifts given to individual members of the church:

4 There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. 6 There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.

7 Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. 8 To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, 10 to another miraculous powers, to another

prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. 11 All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.

The Duration of Spiritual Gifts

Paul taught that the gifts would cease and when they would cease in 1 Cor 13:8: "But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away." He pinpointed when they would pass away in 1 Cor 13:9-10: "For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears." That perfection that he speaks of is the perfect law that gives freedom according to James 1:23-25:

23 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror 24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 25 But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does.

Paul and James use the same analogy to explain the difference between the fragmented prophecy available through spiritual gifts and the full knowledge available in the completed revelation of God's complete and written word. Paul wrote, when telling of the cessation of spiritual gifts in 1 Cor 13:12: "12 Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." James said, as quoted above, "23 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror 24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like." Both point to that which is perfection (Paul) and the perfect law (James). With the perfect law in written form, the need for spiritual gifts ended. Paul declared this perfection of the completed revelation in 2 Tim 3:16-17: "16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

Acts 8:18-19

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."

Simon, who had exploited the Samaritans in his previous life, reverts to his old ways. He knows that the most powerful measure of the Holy Spirit is the ability to pass gifts on to others, and he knows that only the apostles hold that gift. He tried to buy this ability, offering them money. One way that we know for a certainty that there are no spiritual gifts working in the church today is that there are no apostles to pass them on by the laying on of hands.

Acts 8:20-23

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. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. 23 For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."

Simon's sin brought him to a sorry and lost state, and Peter chastised him with pointed and abrasive language. Simon was simultaneously guilty of thinking that he could buy the gift of God; of a heart that was not right with God; of being wicked and in need of repentance and prayer; of having such a thought in his heart; and of being full of bitterness and captive to sin.

Peter castigates him in language that fits every willful sin a Christian can commit. Heb 10:26-31 pronounces the judgment against all who deliberately sin:

26 If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, 27 but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. 28 Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29 How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." 31 It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Indeed, sorry is the deliberate sin, and sorry is the state of one standing before the judgment. Simon, so recently saved from his sin by the grace of God and the blood of Jesus, now finds himself in a state far worse than the one before his conversion, proving that Christians can sin in such a way as to be eternally lost. Peter described the condition of Christians who willfully sin in 2 Peter 2:20-22:

20 If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. 21 It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. 22 Of them the proverbs are true: "A dog returns to its vomit," and, "A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud."

Based on the example of Simon and these scriptures there can be no such condition as the popular false doctrine summarized by the words: *once saved; always saved*. Or by the more formal words: *impossibility of apostasy or perseverance of the saints*.

Simon Repents

Acts 8:24-25

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

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

Simon, just as all of us, recognized his desperate plight as a Christian sinning before God. Repent and pray for forgiveness is the path to recover taught in the scriptures. John spoke to this very same issue in 1 John 1:8-9: "8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." If we confess our sins he, who is our advocate before the father, will forgive us of our sins. 1 John 2:1-2 explains: "But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense — Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. 2 He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins. . . ."

Simon also understood the role of other Christians in our recovery when we sin. "Pray for me," he asked Peter. James also teaches us to pray for one another in James 5:16: "16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

As Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, they preached the gospel in many Samaritan villages.