

Acts Chapters 8

Theme of Acts: The Holy Spirit and the Birth of the Church

Personal Reflection

Complete this section in one sitting or little by little during the week. Begin with prayer, inviting the Holy Spirit into your time. Spending time in the Bible, studying the original intent, meaning and cultural context helps you to understand how it applies to you now.

Further Study: with your small group or on your own

Complete with your small group if you are in one; or complete on your own, spending time with God.

Song for the week: Build My Life - Pat Barrett

Song links: <https://youtu.be/g4KZ8uMGync?si=N7FPXt2TynQNo7yh>

Read Acts 8 Click on any Bible verse in the study to read it or use your own Bible.

Personal Reflection

The last documented words that Jesus spoke were “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).”

Literally, this is “the city of Jerusalem (where they already were), to the familiar region of Judea that surrounded Jerusalem, to the geographically further and culturally different region of Samaria, and to the unfamiliar, far ends of the earth.” Another way of looking at this is “Jesus wanted a witness to proclaim the Gospel in the city where He was executed (Jerusalem). But He also wanted the Good News to reach the land where His ministry was rejected (Judea), and where the disciples felt out of place and looked down on people (Samaria). Finally, He wanted to show the Father to complete strangers of the Hebrews – who lived at the ends of the earth (Fellowship of Israel Related Ministries).”

In response to persecution, Jesus’ words would be fulfilled and the gospel spread.

We have the same direction. To GO and tell. Figuratively where you are is your family, friends and work (your Jerusalem). The area that surrounds you (your Judea) is the area you live in, your acquaintances and where you are comfortable. Where is your Samaria? The place where you may feel out of place, unwelcomed, uncomfortable? What does that demographic and culture look like for you?

Be open to the Holy Spirit’s promptings. Where is the Holy Spirit telling you to GO to spread His good news?

Phillip was one of the 7 chosen who was full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. While he was chosen to help with the distribution of food to the widows, his involvement changed, much like Stephen’s had. He became an evangelist to Samaria. *Optional, read this verse: Acts 6:1-6*

Samaritans were “a mixed race - a blend of Jews left behind after Israel’s exile and Gentiles forcibly settled in the region by Assyria (Archeological Study Bible).” They were not liked by the Jews living in Judea. *Optional, read this verse: 2 Kings 17:24*

Jesus told a parable of the Good Samaritan who helped the man on the side of the road, a lesson that would have stung many of the listeners. When Jesus left Judea and returned to Galilee he HAD to go through Samaria. Normally, Jews would have traveled out of their way to avoid the area - yet it was there that Jesus met the woman at the well, who became the first believer in Samaria, the first witness to Samaria. *Optional, read these verses: Luke 10:25-37, John 4:1-42*

Luke used comparison in his writing. Take a moment using adjectives to compare Samaria and it’s people based on a Jewish perspective versus Jesus’ perspective.

Luke used comparison contrasting the magical arts and the Spiritual gifts. Sorcery was common in the Roman empire. Philip introduced the power of God in opposition to the power of sorcery.

“Magic frequently claimed to manipulate spirits, sometimes controlling them by using special knowledge about them bought from others adept in magic. Often magic formulas spoke of “binding” and “loosening” demons to manipulate them to do the bidders’ will (Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible).”

How is sorcery or magical arts different from magic tricks? What is behind sorcery?

As people bought information on how to manipulate spirits, Simon misunderstood the cost of the Holy Spirit and wanted to pay for receiving Him. He was not completely wrong. When we are given a gift, the giver has paid the price for it for us.

Read Romans 3:23-24, Romans 6:23 and Romans 5:15. Using your own words, how would you have explained these truths to Simon?

We read about Peter and John in the first part of Acts. As a Grecian (Hellenist), Philip probably could not speak Aramaic well to the Samaritans, but as Hebrews, Peter and John could. They came and joined Philip and a “ ” occurred. (Paraphrased from the Life with God Bible.)

They prayed that the people would receive the Holy Spirit, also called “the gift of God.” Many scholars believe that God chose to give this dramatic filling of His Spirit as a sign at this special moment in history. The Holy Spirit enters a person’s life at conversion...but this was a special event. The pouring out of the Spirit would happen again and again in Acts. *Optional, read this verse: Acts 8:15-20*

It was customary to read aloud so it was no wonder that Philip heard the Ethiopian reading. The Ethiopian was reading what he could not understand, but still he read. Upon meeting Philip, he asked for guidance in understanding.

Read Acts 8 out loud. What if anything do you notice differently from when you read it silently?

In the Greco-Roman world, they thought Ethiopia was the southernmost extent of civilization. The early Christians may have seen this as the gospel going to the ends of the earth. “In Greek, ‘Ethiopians’ were black Africans and ‘Ethiopia’ referred to all of Africa south of Egypt (Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible).” Kandake is one of the African empires which was very wealthy. The

Ethiopian eunuch was in charge of the treasury. Given that he was riding in a chariot and had his own scroll of Isaiah, he was most likely well off.

As a eunuch, the Greeks would have viewed him as a “half-man” and the Jewish law would have excluded from joining in worship because of both his physical condition and his being a Gentile. Yet the Ethiopian had gone to Jerusalem to worship. He was a foreigner, but he believed in the Jewish God. *Optional read this verse: Deuteronomy 23:1*

The gospel message is for everyone. Read Isaiah 56:3-8. What does God say about eunuchs and foreigners? If the Ethiopian had read these verses, how might he have been responding to God?

The Ethiopian was reading from Isaiah 53:7-8. God sent Philip, the Grecian who would have studied the passage and knew it was the prophecy fulfilled by Jesus; the gospel that he was teaching. He had the answers the Ethiopian was asking.

When God sends you, when the Holy Spirit prompts you, it is YOU He wants to use. How do the details in the story of Phillip and the Ethiopian encourage you to GO tell?

What message/verses/books or chapters of the Bible do you feel most comfortable and confident to share or discuss? Be vigilant about recognizing opportunities to share with others using your specific Biblical knowledge.

Just like Simon, before faith grew, before understanding grew, before sinful patterns were changed, the Ethiopian was immersed and baptized.

If you believe Jesus is the Messiah, your Lord and Savior, and have not yet gotten baptized, what is holding you back?

The angel told Philip where to GO - and he met the Ethiopian. Then God transported Philip to Azotus. Philip was with yet another ethnic group when he was transported there, people who were descendents of the Philistines. God used unusual measures to get the gospel message to a lost person and to lost people.

Putting it into practice:

Has there ever been a time when you wanted to pay for something God already offered you? Consider things like holding on to shame or regret when God offers you peace and forgiveness. Or wanting to do good or pray more in order to gain God’s favorable response. If you can think of anything, name them, bringing them to light.

Spend some time with God asking for His help to let go of your part to accept His part. Thank Him for His gifts to you.

Further Study - with your small group or on your own

Saul, who would become Paul in Acts 9, continued to persecute those who believed in Jesus. We know he ended up believing in Jesus and wrote 28% of the New Testament. It could be tempting to speed up to who he became. But the disciples (believers) and apostles did not know the future.

Think of just what is known of Saul up through Acts 8. How would you describe him? How might the believers have thought of him and felt about him?

Do you have any "Sauls" in your life who you would like your small group to pray for with you?

In Acts 8 Philip goes from Judea to Samaria. Modern-day Judea and Samaria, is known as the West Bank. According to the Times of Israel, 2023 was the "most violent year for West Bank settler attacks."

Spend some time as a small group praying for the people on both sides, all loved by God. This is not a time to talk politics nor choose sides. God calls us to prayer and it was His intention that people in Judea and Samaria hear the truth of the gospel and know Jesus

Simon wanted to pay for the ability to lay hands on people so that they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. His heart was not in the right place and he lacked understanding.

Some Christians still struggle with payments or penalties that they believe must be paid to be made right with God. What are some examples of this?

The Ethiopian may have felt the sting of not being included when he went to worship in Jerusalem.

Today people may have the same struggle. Who might feel - or actually be - excluded from joining worship at some churches?

Based on what you are learning, what would God call the Church - and you - to do?

The sorcerer, the Ethiopian and the Philistines all lacked knowledge of Jesus before they heard the gospel from Philip. And they were all different from Philip.

How can you invite conversation with those who are different from you?

Is there anything from this week's personal reflection time which you would like to discuss more with your small group?