

The Book of Acts

Lesson 12: The Church Scattered; Philip in Samaria -- Acts 8:1-25

Stephen's blood is barely dry when the storm breaks. A great persecution erupts against the church in Jerusalem, and a young zealot named Saul leads the charge, going house to house, dragging off men and women and throwing them in prison. The believers scatter throughout Judea and Samaria. From a human point of view, it looks like the end. The church is being torn apart, its members running for their lives. The enemy seems to be winning.

But Luke tells the story differently. Those who were scattered, he says, went about preaching the word. The persecution that was meant to crush the gospel instead flung it far and wide. Every fleeing believer became a missionary. The blow aimed at the church's heart only scattered its seeds across new soil. What Saul intended for destruction, God used for the spread of the very message Saul was trying to stamp out.

One of those scattered is Philip, one of the seven. He goes down to a city of Samaria, of all places, to a people the Jews despised and avoided, and he proclaims Christ to them. The Samaritans listen, signs follow, demons flee, the sick are healed, and Luke records a beautiful result: there was much joy in that city. The gospel has crossed one of the oldest and bitterest dividing lines in the ancient world. The message Jesus gave on the hillside, you will be my witnesses in Judea and Samaria, is coming true.

But not every heart is what it seems. A man named Simon, who had amazed the city with his magic and let people call him the power of God, believes and is baptized along with the rest. Yet when the apostles come and the Spirit is given through the laying on of their hands, Simon sees a chance for profit and power. He offers them money to buy the ability. Peter's rebuke is swift and severe: your heart is not right before God. Repent. The chapter holds up two kinds of faith side by side, the joyful, genuine faith of a city and the grasping, self-serving heart of a man who wanted God's power without God's lordship.

Group Discussion: The persecution meant to destroy the church actually scattered believers who then spread the gospel everywhere they went (vv. 1-4). Why do you think God so often advances His purposes through hardship rather than around it, and where have you seen good come out of difficulty?

Personal Reflection: Philip carried the gospel to the Samaritans, a people his own culture taught him to despise (v. 5). Is there a group of people you find it hard to imagine sharing Christ with, because of prejudice, history, or discomfort? What might God be asking of you?

Read Acts 8:1-25

Study Questions

1. A great persecution scattered the believers, yet those who were scattered went about preaching the word (vv. 1-4). What does this reveal about God's providence and the way He advances the gospel even through suffering and opposition?
2. The scattered believers kept preaching the word even while fleeing for their lives (v. 4). When your own life is disrupted by hardship, loss, or upheaval, do you still witness and serve, or do you go silent? How can difficulty become an occasion for testimony rather than retreat?
3. Philip proclaimed Christ in a city of Samaria, and there was much joy in that city (vv. 5-8). Why is it significant that the gospel went to the Samaritans, a people the Jews despised, and what does this teach about the reach of the gospel across human barriers?
4. Philip crossed a deep cultural and racial barrier to bring the gospel to the Samaritans (v. 5). Are there people you quietly write off, because of prejudice, history, politics, or discomfort, as unlikely to receive Christ? What prejudice might God be asking you to lay down?
5. When the Samaritans believed Philip's preaching, they were baptized, and later the apostles came and laid hands on them so they received the Holy Spirit (vv. 12-17). What does this passage show about the conversion pattern of belief and baptism, and about the unique role of the apostles in imparting miraculous gifts?
6. Simon was drawn to the power and spectacle of the Spirit's gifts, while the Samaritans rejoiced simply to know Christ (vv. 8, 18-19). When you come to God, do you seek Him for who He is, or mainly for what you can get from Him? How can you grow to desire the Giver more than His gifts?
7. Simon believed and was baptized, yet his heart remained captivated by power and self-promotion (vv. 13, 18-19). What does this teach about the difference between an outward profession and a heart truly surrendered to God, and how can we tell the difference in ourselves?
8. Peter saw straight through Simon's request to the condition of his heart (vv. 21-23). What old motives, pride, the craving for control or recognition, the desire to use faith for personal gain, still surface in your own heart? How do you handle them when they appear?
9. When Simon tried to buy the gift of God with money, Peter rebuked him sharply: your heart is not right before God; repent therefore of this wickedness and pray that the intent of your heart may be forgiven (vv. 20-23). What does this teach about the gift of God, about the heart God requires, and about what a believer who falls into sin must do?
10. Looking back over this whole passage, the gospel advancing through persecution, crossing barriers into Samaria, and Simon's exposed heart, name one specific way the Lord is calling you to grow, in witness, in love across barriers, or in a heart kept right before Him, and what is one step you will take this week.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Genesis 50:20, God meaning for good what others meant for evil; Acts 1:8, the promised witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth; Ephesians 2:14-16, Christ breaking down the dividing wall of hostility; 1 John 1:8-9, the promise of forgiveness for the one who confesses sin; Psalm 73:25-26, desiring God Himself above all else on earth