

THE SCATTERED CHURCH—TO SAMARIA (The ministry of Philip the evangelist)

Acts 8:1-40
Key Verse:1b

“On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.”

The Risen Jesus had given the apostles a blueprint for the expansion of the church. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The death of Stephen was the climax of the first period of witness in Jerusalem. The persecution which arose following Stephen’s martyrdom was a fanatic and frenzied effort to stamp out the church. The most active person in this persecution was the young man named Saul. We will meet him later. Chapter 8 is the account of how the church spread in Samaria. It is largely about the ministry of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the 7 deacons appointed to serve the Jerusalem church. In his ministry, there is also a forward look to the Gentile world and to the ends of the earth.

1. Philip preaches in Samaria (4-25)

Those who were scattered because of persecution preached the word wherever they went. Philip went to a city in Samaria and proclaimed Christ there. God was with Philip to give him power to heal and cast out demons. So the people listened carefully to what Philip said. Many believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God. They were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

There was a kind of spiritual leader in Samaria named Simon. He was a sorcerer, and he enjoyed the acclaim of all the people of Samaria. Everyone regarded him a man with divine power. They called him, “The Great Power.” Since the people of Samaria were drawn by miracles, they quickly turned from following Simon to following Philip. The faith of the Samaritans was largely based on the miracles they saw; there was no deep Bible study. Simon himself decided to believe in Jesus and he also was baptized. He followed Philip around, seeking to learn something and perhaps find the secret of his great power. He did not seek to know Jesus whom Philip preached.

Philip realized that these new believers in Samaria needed help. There were so many of them that he couldn’t disciple them all. He reported to the Jerusalem church—to the Apostles—that God was working mightily in Samaria, so they sent the top Apostles, Peter and John, to see what was going on and to encourage them. Peter and John came and saw the work of God. They prayed for the new believers that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because even though they had been baptized in the Name of

Jesus, they had not received the Holy Spirit. Perhaps their deep roots in the devil's work kept the Holy Spirit out. Now, many demons had gone out and the Holy Spirit needed to come in and fill the empty hearts before more worse demons came in. Peter and John prayed and placed their hands on the new believers and they received the Holy Spirit. But the work of the Spirit in them was just the beginning. These people needed to study the Bible and learn about God's redemptive work in the Old Testament. They needed to learn about the life and teachings of Jesus. They needed to continue in the word of God so that they could become Jesus' disciples and be rooted and grounded in truth.

Simon was not much interested in Bible study. He was more interested in how the Holy Spirit had been given in response to the laying on of hands by the Apostles. So he went to Peter and offered to give him money in exchange for the power to give the Holy Spirit. He saw that this would put him one notch above Philip, for Philip evidently lacked the power to give the Holy Spirit.

Peter's response was quick and clear. "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money." Peter saw that Simon was an unchanged man. His heart was full of bitterness and he was a captive to sin. He had no relationship with God. Peter told him to repent. So Simon begged Peter to pray for him so that he would not be cursed by God. Perhaps there were others among the new believers whose faith was also very shallow. The Apostles returned to Jerusalem, preaching in the gospel in Samaritan villages as they went. They probably remembered their first visit to Samaria with Jesus, and the Samaritan woman with whom he talked and the village of Samaritans who came out to listen to his word because of her testimony. These Samaritans had confessed Jesus as their Savior and the Savior of the world.

God decided to move Philip from Samaria. He sent him down a desert road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza. There was one man with a prepared heart waiting for a Bible teacher, and God sent Philip to him. What a contrast to the huge, noisy, fruitful, exciting ministry in Samaria! This one man was not a likely person to become a Christian. He was a high official in the court of Queen Candace of Ethiopia. In fact, he was in charge of all of her treasury. And he was a eunuch. It was the practice in ancient times and in pagan nations for the men who served queens or princesses to be emasculated, castrated. What a high price to pay for a top job in the queen's court! This man was spiritually thirsty. He was looking for meaning in his life. So he had studied Judaism. Perhaps he was a proselyte. At any rate, he was a serious student, so he went to Jerusalem to worship. He was a highly educated man. He was not looking for an emotional experience; nor was he looking for a miracle. He sought truth. So, on his way home, he was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah. The Spirit of the Lord told Philip to go near the chariot. He did so and heard the man reading Isaiah aloud. Philip offered to teach him the Bible one-to-one. This was so different from his ministry in Samaria, where the people couldn't be less interested in Bible study. This Ethiopian

eunuch invited Philip to sit with him in his chariot and teach him the Bible.

The eunuch was reading Isaiah 53. He felt like this passage was speaking directly to him—especially the words, “in his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants?...” reflected his deep sorrow about himself. He had experienced great humiliation. He could never have children or descendants. He wondered if there were someone who could really understand him. He asked Philip, “Who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Philip began with that passage and told him about Jesus, who suffered pain and shame and humiliation on the cross for our sins. Jesus was like a sheep led to the slaughter; he did not open his mouth or defend himself. He suffered like this to set us free from bondage to sin. He died so that we might be forgiven. God raised him from death so that we might have life and hope in him. The eunuch made a decision. He accepted Jesus’ love and grace. He put his faith in Jesus the Son of God. He wanted to announce his faith and commitment to the world, so he asked to be baptized. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord took Philip away. He went to Azotus then settled in Caesarea, where he raised a family of 4 daughters who all became prophetesses. The eunuch went on his way rejoicing to his own country of Ethiopia. Perhaps he is the ancestor of the Coptic church—his spiritual descendants.