

# The Acts of the Apostles

## LESSON 13

## Saul Persecuted the Church (Acts 8:1-3)

***Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. 3 As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.***

Saul became an instrument in the hands of the Sanhedrin to eliminate Christianity (Gal. 1:13, 23; 1 Tim. 1:13).

***For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.*** Galatians 1:13-14

Up to this time most of the opposition has come to church leaders. Now it is spreading to all believers. Saul may have even had a hit list from which he was working with Stephen's name at the top.

He may have been a ringleader at the death of Stephen (Acts 7:58; 22:19-20).

***So I said, "Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You. And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him."*** Acts 22:19-20

He received letters of authorization from the Council (Acts 9:1-2; 22:5; 26:10).

***I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women, as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished.*** Acts 22:4-6

Saul reacted to Stephen's death by renewing his vigor in the persecution of the church (1 Cor. 15:9).

***For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.***

He was not convinced by Stephen's arguments. He was upset that Stephen died as a hero instead of as a blasphemer. Some of the descriptions of his actions against the

church include the following:

- He made havoc of the church (Acts 8:3).
- The word “havoc” that is used in this verse is a word that is commonly applied to wild beasts such as lions or wolves and the devastations that they commit. Saul was not acting as a human being, he was raging like an animal out of control.
- He breathed threats and murder against the disciples (Acts 9:1).
- Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest...
- He bound men and women and put them in prison (Acts 22:4-6).
- He was responsible for the death of Christians (Acts 22:4).

Saul's persecution of the church teaches us a couple of things.

- Persecution tends to promote the very thing that it seeks to destroy.
- One of the best ways to make Christians active and zealous is to persecute them.

## **Philip Preached in Samaria (Acts 8:4-8)**

***Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. 5 Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. 6 And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. 7 For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. 8 And there was great joy in that city.***

Philip was forced to leave Jerusalem under the persecution of Saul. He went to Samaria.

The Samaritans had a history stemming back to the dividing of Israel into two kingdoms. In order to keep people in the Northern Kingdom from having to go to Jerusalem for temple worship and the feasts, Ahab established a place of worship to Baal in the city of Samaria (1 Kgs. 16:29-33; Hos. 8:5-6). It was not long before the entire Northern Kingdom was called “Samaria.” After Samaria fell to the Assyrians, the Assyrians infiltrated the region and intermarried with the population creating a mixed race of people. The Jews who remained true to worship at Jerusalem despised the Samaritans because they viewed them as idolators and no longer fully Jewish.

When Philip went to Samaria, it was really the next step in the progression of taking the Gospel to the Gentile world. Others went to many other places (Acts 11:19).

***Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only.***

Philip is a model evangelist (Acts 21:8; Eph. 4:11).

***On the next day we who were Paul's companions departed and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. Acts 21:8***

He is actually the only one who was specifically called an evangelist in the New Testament. As an evangelist he ministered beyond the borders of the Jerusalem church. An evangelist is a ground breaking ministry. As an evangelist his primary function was to preach the gospel. The word that is used in verse 5 relative to Philip's preaching is the word that comes from the Greek word euangelizo. It means to evangelize or announce the good news of salvation. As an evangelist he ministered to multitudes or single individuals with equal passion. As an evangelist he often had to confront the powers of darkness. As an evangelist he functioned with the tools of evangelism.

- This included preaching the word.
- This included healing the sick.
- This included casting out demonic spirits.

Recall how Jesus sent his disciples out (Mt. 10:7-8; Luke 9:1-2).

***And as you go, preach, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Matthew 10:7-8***

As an evangelist he witnessed the fruit of salvation—great joy (Is. 12:3; Ps. 51:12).

***Therefore with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. Isaiah 12:3***

An evangelist is a reaping ministry. In a sense he reaped a harvest that he did not sow. Jesus sowed the seeds for this harvest with the woman at the well. As an evangelist he was concerned about the follow-up of new converts.

Philip recognized the limitations of his ministry. It is not certain why Philip did not pray for these people to be baptized in the Holy Spirit. Perhaps he was unsure of whether or not it was appropriate for Samaritans to receive such an experience. In any case he must have sent word to the apostles at Jerusalem to come and finish what he had begun.

## **Simon the Sorcerer Believed (Acts 8:9-13)**

***But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, 10 to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the great power of God." 11 And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time. 12 But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. 13 Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.***

The city of Samaria had been under the spiritual influence of Simon, the sorcerer. Simon operated in signs and wonders. Simon was perceived to be someone great. Simon was perceived to be operating with the power of God. Simon's power was one of sorcery that was inspired by the kingdom of darkness.

The sorcery referred to here undoubtedly had to do with the practice of magical arts and deception. He operated in "lying signs and wonders" (See II Th. 2:9-10).

***The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved.***

***This evil man will come to do the work of Satan with counterfeit power and signs and miracles. He will use every kind of wicked deception to fool those who are on their way to destruction because they refuse to believe the truth that would save them. –NLT***

It should be noted that the tendency of people is to believe that any miracle must come from God. Signs and wonders are not something that should be used to authenticate a ministry. In the last days there will be many false apostles and prophets that will deceive people through the use of the supernatural. The word of God is always the measuring rod of a ministry.

The preaching of the Gospel broke Simon's hold on the people.

- The people listened to Philip's message (Acts 8:6).
- The people believed the word (Acts 8:12).
- The demons came out of people (Acts 8:7).
- The people were baptized in water (Acts 8:13).

Water baptism was crucial at the very beginning of their spiritual walk. It should be entered into at the first available opportunity.

Simon the sorcerer responded to the Gospel as well. There was a positive side to his response.

On the positive side:

- He believed the Gospel.
- He was baptized in water.
- He may have even been baptized in the Holy Spirit.
- He was very impressed by the supernatural aspect of Philip's ministry. He wanted to do what he saw Philip do.

There was a negative side to his response.

- He wanted to purchase the ability to duplicate what he saw. This act of buying influence or church offices was later called simony after Simon Magnus.
- He needed a lot of sanctification before he was ready to be used of the Lord. His heart was not right in the matter. While his spirit may have been saved, he still had a lot of work to be done in the soul realm. Too often spectacular conversions like that of Simon are celebrated by standing the person up and giving them a platform for ministry well before they are ready for such an assignment.

## **Peter and John Ministered to the Converts (Acts 8:14-25)**

Notice how often the disciples seem to function in multiples of two.

- They laid hands on the new converts for the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-17).
- They adjusted Simon and called him to repentance (Acts 18-24).
- They preached the Gospel in many other cities of Samaria (Acts 8:25).

So when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans.

## **Philip Preached to the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-40)**

Notice several things about this ministry.

- Philip reflected God's heart by caring for the individual as well as the crowds.
- Philip had great success because he ministered to prepared people.

You cannot be much more prepared than reading Isaiah 53.

- We should never be intimidated by the wealthy and the influential in our witness. They are human beings with the same needs and everyone and need to be saved.
- God will arrange divine encounters with people who will be able to open big doors.
- The attitude of the Ethiopian should form the basis for all of our responses to the work of the Lord in our lives.

***“What hinders me from being baptized?”***

Or

“Do I have to be baptized to be saved?”