

CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE- PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-Presbyterian
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DHW BIBLE CLASS LESSON 9 THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES CHAPTER 8

INTRODUCTION

A new phase in carrying out the Great Commission of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8) began in chapter 8. The earlier seven chapters narrate the birth of the local church and the completion of the first concentric circle of Acts 1:8. The gospel has been preached in Jerusalem. It is the Holy Spirit who empowers the church in the fulfilment of the Great Commission. Many Jews repented of their sins, and were baptised into the Church of Christ in spite of persecutions by the temple priests, the Pharisees, the scribes and leaders of the people. This resulted in a large community of believers united in one heart and soul to do the will of God. So far, the evangelistic activity by the apostles was confined to Jerusalem.

Chapter 8 records the movement of the mission work to Judaea and Samaria (cf. Acts 1:8). Persecutions may cause sufferings to the people of God, but they strengthen the faith of the genuine believers and cause them to disperse and spread the gospel to other regions. Interestingly, it was not The Twelve who initially went out to evangelise in Judaea and Samaria but two of The Seven who were chosen to manage the food distribution. They were Stephen and Philip (6:5), men who were full of the

Holy Spirit and wisdom and whose personal integrity was beyond reproach.

Stephen helped to pave the way for world evangelism. He contributed in teaching the right view concerning the temple and the law, and the centrality of the Lord Jesus Christ in Christianity. His martyrdom at the end of his enlightening penetrating speech to the religious council in fact got Saul (later became the apostle Paul) to be deeply involved. Stephen did not know Saul, but he prayed for his persecutors who stoned him to death. The great Augustine remarked: "The Church owes Paul to the prayers of Stephen."

Philip, also one of The Seven, contributed towards world evangelism by his bold trip to Samaria. It was not easy for Philip to go into Samaria to witness Christ and preach the gospel of salvation to the Samaritans. The Jews and the Samaritans had a long history of animosity. The Jews despised the Samaritans. The Samaritans had their own rival temple in Mount Gerizim. One remembers how the Samaritan woman at a well in Sychar said to the Lord Jesus Christ; "How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? For the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans" (John 4:9). At the end of his evangelistic work in Samaria, Philip had another opportunity to personally witness to an Ethiopian official who was returning home from his pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

All these events in chapter 8 provide precious lessons for Christian living and testimony. The chapter falls naturally into three sections: (1) The great dispersion as a result of persecution (vv.1-4); (2) the evangelisation of Samaria (vv. 5-25);

and (3) the conversion of the Ethiopian official (vv. 26-40).

COMMENTARY

The Great Dispersion

Stephen had accused the religious leaders of persecuting and slaying the prophets, of disobeying God's laws and of betraying and murdering the "Just One". The religious leaders were furious with him and stoned him to death. Some of the Christians took Stephen's body and gave him a proper burial. There was great mourning over his death.

Saul, who was probably present at the court hearing of Stephen in the Sanhedrin, not only approved of the stoning but took pleasure in his murder. He "made havoc" of the church and conducted house-to-house search for believers of "the way" and put them into prison. His persecution was brutal and cruel.

A great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem. This caused many Christians to disperse throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria. But the twelve apostles themselves remained in Jerusalem. This was important because at this time, Jerusalem was still the headquarters of the church. One precious lesson to note is that when a local church involves herself in missions, she must not neglect the home base (mother church). To do so would be folly. The loss of the mother church to Satan would result in the automatic loss of all her mission outreaches.

Those who left Jerusalem and moved to the neighbouring regions went everywhere "preaching the word". Not all of them became preachers and missionaries. The word "preaching" simply means that they shared the

good news. They witnessed Christ in the new country. Some relocated to different parts of Judaea, outside of Jerusalem; some to Phoenice, Cyprus, and Antioch, and some perhaps went as far as Rome. Satan did his worst through his agents to disrupt and destroy the infant church, but God overruled. The gospel increased and many Gentiles who heard the gospel were converted. God's plan and purpose cannot be thwarted.

Philip Visits Samaria

Philip travelled north to Samaria to preach Christ to the Samaritans. This was a bold step because the Samaritans were despised and treated as heretics by the Jews. Their hostility had started when ten of the twelve tribes of Israel broke away from the main tribe of Judah and the tribe of Benjamin. The relationship worsened when the Assyrians defeated the ten tribes and the city of Samaria was captured. This happened in 722 B.C. The Assyrians deported many of the Jews and repopulated the land with foreigners. The foreigners intermarried with the Jews who were left behind by the conquering Assyrians. Things deteriorated when the Samaritans built their rival temple on Mount Gerizim around 400 B.C. But around 128 B.C. the Samaritan temple was destroyed by the High Priest, John Hyrcanus of Jerusalem. Although during the time of Christ, the Samaritan temple was no longer standing, the Samaritans continued with their religious offerings and sacrifices as required by the Mosaic Law. The Samaritans used the name of God as the Jews because of their historical links. Although there are many similarities between the Jews and the Samaritans such as: they accepted the five books of the Pentateuch written by Moses, but rejected all the other writings and prophets; and they believed that God

would one day send a prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15). But because the Samaritans repudiated the temple in Jerusalem and the rest of the canonical Old Testament except the Pentateuch, they cannot be considered as having a true relationship with God. They may be likened to the Roman Catholic Church which use the same names of God as the Christians but their adoption of the Apocrypha on top of the OT and NT books and the worship of idols and Mary make them a false religion.

So imagine the difficulty and hostility Philip might have to face in the city of Samaria. By God's power, Philip performed many miracles. He preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Samaritans. They saw the miracle-signs, which he did – unclean spirits came out of many who were possessed; paralytics and cripples were healed. There was great joy in that city. Men and women were converted and baptised in the name of Jesus Christ.

Simon the Sorcerer

Before Philip came to Samaria, the city was bewitched by a sorcerer named Simon Magus [sorcery — *mageuo* (root word for magic)]. He proclaimed himself to be some great divine. All the Samaritans in the city believed him and acknowledged that he had “the great power of God” (v.10). For a long time, the people were beguiled by his wizardry but the gospel of Jesus Christ was more powerful. Many of the Samaritans having heard the gospel preached by Philip believed, and were baptized. Then Simon also believed and was baptised. Following that, he continued with Philip and marvelled at the sign miracles.

Now, The Twelve in Jerusalem heard that the Samaritans were

receptive to the Word of God. They anticipated that the question of whether the Jews would accept and welcome the Samaritans as their equal would arise. So they sent the apostles Peter and John to Samaria to witness the spiritual conversion that was taking place in the city. It was appropriate to send John because he had an unpleasant encounter with the Samaritans. During Christ's earthly ministry, there was an instance when Christ and His disciples stopped at a Samaritan village on their way to Jerusalem. The Samaritans did not welcome them because they were bound for Jerusalem. Because of this inhospitality, John and James called on the Lord Jesus Christ to command fire from heaven to burn the Samaritans (Luke 9:51-56). This present trip to Samaria would be instructive for both John and Peter.

Peter & John Visit Samaria

Peter and John found that the Samaritans were baptised by water but had yet to receive the Holy Spirit. So they prayed and laid their hands on the Samaritans and they received the Holy Spirit. This was something out of the ordinary. Peter had promised that all who repented and were baptised would receive the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit (2:38).¹ But here we see that the Samaritans believed and were baptised but did not receive the Holy Spirit until the apostles came. Why was this the case? The Samaritans had rejected two thirds of the Old Testament Scripture. Moreover, they rejected the temple in Jerusalem, which was chosen by God to be the place of worship (not the temple on Mount Gerizim). They had to recognise that salvation comes from

¹ Later Paul also taught that those who “heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye

the Jews (John 4:22) i.e. the Messiah has to come from the Jewish nation.

If they had been given the Holy Spirit without their erroneous beliefs being repudiated, there would be two forms of Christianity—a Jewish version that was based on the Jesus who was inseparably connected with Jerusalem, and a Samaritan version with a “Jesus” that had nothing to do with Jerusalem at all. Such a Samaritan version would have been spurious. The salvation of the Samaritans was withheld until the apostles came. They believed and were baptised but were not saved yet. If this had not happened according to Scriptures, then the animosity between the Jews and Samaritans would prolong for generations.

Another reason could be that Peter and John needed to be convinced that God had accepted the Samaritans just as He had accepted them. Peter therefore played a decisive role in using the “keys of the kingdom” (Matthew 16:19) to open it successively to the Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles (Cornelius, Acts 10). This was a needful and important lesson for the Samaritans. God would not authenticate their profession of repentance and of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ until they submitted to, and identified themselves with the apostles and Jerusalem.²

A third possible reason was that the Samaritans need to grow in their faith. The apostles were the appointed writers of the NT for the local church. In order for the Samaritans to submit

² Today there are so many false cults who claim to be Christian, and talk much about Jesus and the Spirit, but who would either deny that Jesus actually and historically died at Jerusalem, or deny that He bodily rose again, and would repudiate the authority of the apostles from Jerusalem. Their Jesus and their Spirit have little and nothing to do with the historical facts (David Gooding, *True to the Faith*, p.145).

themselves to the teachings of the apostles, they must come under the authority of the apostles. What better way to do than what is revealed here in Holy Scripture?

Peter Rebukes Simon

Simon Magus, who had been following Philip, saw that the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit when the apostles laid their hands on them. He was desirous of this power. There was no mention of any manifestation that the Samaritans had received the Holy Spirit. One possibility was that the apostles could tell because they possessed discernment from God. It was also plausible that the Samaritans, after having received the Holy Spirit spoke in “tongues” (2:11).

Simon Magus offered money to the apostles in exchange for their power. Peter rebuked him openly and told him that “thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money” (v.20). Peter added that Simon could have no part in the ministry because his heart was not right before God.³ Simon’s whole attitude was that of a professional wizard who was convinced that the apostles had great magical powers. He thought that he could with his money acquire the art and to use the power in his trade. Peter called him to repent of the evil in his heart and to pray to God. If Peter had seen

³ From this act of Simon comes the word “simony” the crime of buying, selling, or bargaining for spiritual functions. This sin is virtually repeated when a man gets himself appointed to office in the Church, not that he may do the work of God, but that he may make a living or gratify his ambition; when he seeks a reputation for piety that may secure his own temporal advantage; when for the sake of fame he covets the power of converting others, while careless of his own spiritual state (Principal Lindsay, *Acts of the Apostles*, p.99).

repentance in Simon's heart, he would have said that God would forgive his sins. If Peter had seen that Simon's conscience was utterly dead, he would have closed the door of hope. Peter continued and said that he perceived that Simon was "in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity" (v.23). The expression "gall of bitterness" is a Hebraic saying which reflects Deuteronomy 29:18: "*Lest there should be among you man, or woman, or family, or tribe, whose heart turneth away this day from the LORD our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations; lest there should be among you a root that beareth gall and wormwood.*" [Emphasis added] The verse speaks of a root that bears bitter poison. Peter used it as a metaphorical expression to warn Simon that his evil thoughts would lead to bitter results for himself and for the people whom he deceived. Simon was in danger of being so accustomed to his evil ways that he would not be able to back away from it. Simon asked Peter to pray that none of the terrible things mentioned would happen to him. He was terrified but he was not repentant. He confessed his fear of punishment but not the "horror of guilt."

The apostles returned to Jerusalem after confirming the church in Samaria, conferring the gift of the Holy Spirit and chastising Simon the Sorcerer. Along the way, they preached the gospel of Christ in many Samaritan villages.

Conversion of the Ethiopian Official

The angel of the Lord instructed Philip, either in a vision or through an inward prompting, to go south to Gaza which was an old city of the Philistines, situated about sixty miles south-west of Jerusalem. It was the southern most city of the Philistines near the Mediterranean coast. There were at

least two roads from Jerusalem to Gaza. Philip was told to take the "desert road", probably the one by Hebron, which went through the desert hills of southern Judaea. The word "desert" is used to mean a place that was thinly populated and unfit for farming. There, Philip met the Ethiopian official.

The Ethiopian official had gone on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship at the temple and was returning to his country. He was either a proselyte or a God fearer. The region of Ethiopia is today's Upper Nile stretching approximately from Aswan to Khartoum. The Ethiopian official was a eunuch holding the important post of treasurer (Minister of Finance) under Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. The title "Candace" was used for the queens of Ethiopia just as Pharaoh was used for the kings of Egypt.

The Ethiopian was sitting on his chariot reading the scroll of Isaiah. He must have got a copy of it in Jerusalem. He was reading aloud as was the custom in those days even when there were no listeners. The Holy Spirit directed Philip to go near the chariot. Philip heard him reading a passage from Isaiah 53:7,8: He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth... Philip asked him whether he understood the passage and he humbly admitted his ignorance.

He then invited Philip to ride with him. The Ethiopian asked Philip, "Of whom speaketh the prophet this? Of himself or of some other man?" (v.34). Philip began at the same scripture and preached Jesus Christ to him. When the chariot passed by a pool of water, the Ethiopian asked if he could be baptised? Philip replied that he could "if thou believest with all thine

heart”.⁴ The Ethiopian answered, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God” and commanded the chariot to stop. They both went into the water and Philip baptised him.

When they came out of the water, Philip was miraculously “caught away” (snatched) by the Holy Spirit. The Ethiopian went on his way rejoicing. Philip was found at Azotus or Ashdod, another old city of the Philistines, about thirty miles from Gaza, midway between Gaza and Joppa. He preached in all the cities until he came to Caesarea.

PRACTICAL VALUE

There are quite a number of practical lessons for us. The work of evangelism is not confined to the apostles. Stephen and Philip were not only devout believers, who were appointed “to serve tables”, they were men who knew the Scriptures and were filled with the Holy Spirit. They were prepared to surmount all difficulties and hardships to preach Christ and the gospel of salvation to others. We should do likewise, but first we must know the Scriptures for we are to teach the Word of Truth and not our own ideas.

Persecution is inevitable especially if we believe and stand for our faith in Christ Jesus. Down through the history of the Church, persecution of Christians have strengthened the faith of the believers and increased their numbers. The underground churches in China are good examples.

Simon Magus’ experience teaches us a very valuable lesson. One can profess faith in Christ, be

baptised and yet be wallowing in the “gall of bitterness.” A person who believes is saved and has the gift of the Holy Spirit if his heart is right before God. Man cannot see the heart of the believer but God can and the individual himself knows whether he has truly repented. We should examine ourselves to see if we are in the same condition as Simon Magus. Peter’s counsel is applicable: “Repent and ask God for forgiveness, and accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.” AMEN

DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Daily Readings

- Monday: acts 8:1-4; Galatians 1:13, 14.
- Tuesday: Acts 8:5-8; John 4:9; john14:12; Acts 1:8.
- Wednesday: Acts 8:9-13; John 4:20-29.
- Thursday: Acts 8:14-25; Ephesians 2:4-13.
- Friday: Acts 8:26-40; 1 Corinthians 15:1-4.

Discussion Questions

1. What were the results of Stephen’s witness for the Church?

⁴ This verse, Acts 8:37, is omitted by the NIV as spurious. They placed it in the footnote.

2. What difficulties did Philip face in witnessing Christ in Samaria?

3. Can the Charismatics use this example in Samaria to argue that a person is saved today but does not have the Holy Spirit until he speaks in tongues?

4. Cite examples of a modern day Simon Magus? Have you met any of them?

5. What are the qualities that we can learn from Philip on how to preach the gospel?

6. Is this the definition of baptism, "believe and be baptised"?

7. What can we learn about God's role in the salvation of the Ethiopian Eunuch and the lack of salvation in Simon Magus?
