

CHAPTER 6

A CHURCH ON THE MOVE

Acts 8

There is one thing stronger than all the armies in the world," wrote Victor Hugo, "and that is an idea whose time has come."

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is much more than an idea. The Gospel is "the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16, NKJV). It is God's "dynamite" for breaking down sin's barriers and setting the prisoners free. Its time had come and the church was on the move. The "salt" was now leaving the "Jerusalem saltshaker" to be spread over all Judea and Samaria, just as the Lord had commanded (Acts 1:8).

The events in Acts 8 center around four different men.

1. A Zealous Persecutor—Saul (Acts 8:1–3)

The Book of Acts and the epistles give sufficient data for a sketch of Saul's early life.

1. He was born in Tarsus in Cilicia (Acts 22:3)
2. "Hebrew of the Hebrews" (see 2 Cor. 11:22; Phil. 3:5)
3. The "son of a Pharisee" (Acts 23:6)
4. A Roman citizen (Acts 16:37; 22:25–28)
5. He was educated in Jerusalem by Gamaliel (Acts 22:3)
6. A devoted Pharisee (Acts 26:4–5; Phil. 3:5)
7. Measured by the Law, his life was blameless (Phil. 3:6)
8. He was one of the most promising young Pharisees in Jerusalem, well on his way to becoming a great leader for the Jewish faith (Gal. 1:14)

- Saul's zeal for the Law was displayed most vividly in his persecution of the church (Gal. 1:13–14; Phil. 3:6).

- He really thought that persecuting the believers was one way of serving God, so he did it with a clear conscience (2 Tim. 1:3).

He obeyed the light that he had and, when God gave him more light, he obeyed that and became a Christian!

In what ways did Saul persecute the church?

- He "made havoc of the church," and the verb here describes a wild animal mangling its prey.

When Christ spoke to Saul on the Damascus road, He compared him to a beast! (Acts 9:5)

- The stoning of Stephen, which Saul approved, shows the lengths to which he would go to achieve his purpose.

- He persecuted both men and women “unto the death” (Acts 22:4)

- Entering both houses and synagogues (Acts 22:19)

- He had the believers imprisoned and beaten (Acts 22:19; 26:9–11).

- If they renounced their faith in Jesus Christ (“compelling them to blaspheme”—Acts 26:11), they were set free; if they did not recant, they could be killed.

He was a man with great authority whose devotion to Moses completely controlled his life, and almost destroyed his life. He did it “ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Tim. 1:13), and God showed him mercy and saved him.

Saul of Tarsus is the last person in Jerusalem you would have chosen to be the great apostle to the Gentiles!

2. A Faithful Preacher—Philip (Acts 8:4–8)

Samaritans = Were a “half-breed” people, a mixture of Jew and Gentile. The nation originated when the Assyrians captured the ten northern tribes in 732 B.C., deported many of the people, and then imported others who intermarried with the Jews. The Samaritans had their own temple and priesthood and openly opposed fraternization with the Jews (John 4:9).

We have no reason to believe that God permitted this persecution because His people were negligent and had to be “forced” to leave Jerusalem. The fact that Saul persecuted believers “even unto strange [foreign] cities” (Acts 26:11) would suggest that their witness was bearing fruit even beyond Jerusalem.

Because of the witness and death of Stephen, it is possible that the focus of the persecution was against the Hellenistic Jews rather than the “native” Jews. It would be easier for Saul and his helpers to identify the Hellenistic believers since many of the “native” Jews were still very Jewish and very much attached to the temple.

Peter was still keeping a “kosher home” when he was sent to evangelize the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:9–16).

Acts 6:5 – Philip was chosen as a deacon

God directed him to evangelize in Samaria, an area that had been prohibited to the Apostles (Matt. 10:5–6)

The word for preaching in Acts 8:4 means “**to preach the Gospel, to evangelize**”; while the word in Acts 8:5 means “**to announce as a herald.**”

Philip was God’s commissioned herald to deliver His message to the people of Samaria.

Philip not only declared God’s Word, but he also demonstrated God’s power by performing miracles.

Great persecution (Acts 8:1) plus the preaching of the Gospel resulted in great joy!

Both in his Gospel and in the Book of Acts, Luke emphasizes the joy of salvation.

(Luke 2:10; 15:7, 10; 24:52; Acts 8:8; 13:52; 15:3).

The people of Samaria who heard the Gospel and believed were delivered from:

1. Physical affliction
2. Demonic control
3. From their sins

No wonder there was great joy!

God in His grace had built a bridge between two estranged peoples and made the believers one in Christ, and soon He would extend that bridge to the Gentiles and include them as well.

3. A Clever Deceiver—Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8:9–25)

It is a basic principle in Scripture that wherever God sows His true believers, Satan will eventually sow his counterfeits (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43).

The enemy comes as a lion to devour, and when that approach fails, he comes as a serpent to deceive. Satan's tool in this case was a sorcerer named Simon.

The word translated "bewitched" in Acts 8:9 and 11 simply means "astounded, confounded." It is translated "wondered" in Acts 8:13. The people were amazed at the things that Simon did and, therefore, they believed the things that he said.

They considered him "the great power of God." Simon's sorcery was energized by Satan (2 Thes. 2:1–12) and was used to magnify himself, while Philip's miracles were empowered by God and were used to glorify Christ. Simon started to lose his following as the Samaritans listened to Philip's messages, believed on Jesus Christ, were born again, and were baptized.

What does it mean that "Simon himself believed"? (Acts 8:13)

We can answer that question best by asking another one.

What was the basis of his "faith"?

His faith was not in the Word of God, but in the miracles he saw Philip perform; and there is no indication that Simon repented of his sins.

- He certainly did not believe with *all* his heart (Acts 8:37).
- His faith was like that of the people of Jerusalem who witnessed our Lord's miracles (John 2:23–25)
- Even like that of the demons (James 2:19).

Simon continued with Philip, not to hear the Word and learn more about Jesus Christ, but to witness the miracles and perhaps learn how they were done.

The wickedness of Simon’s heart was fully revealed by the ministry of the two apostles. Simon not only wanted to perform miracles, but he also wanted the power to convey the gift of the Holy Spirit to others—and he was quite willing to pay for this power! It is this passage that gives us the word *simony*, which means “the buying and selling of church offices or privileges.”

Peter’s words to Simon give every indication that the sorcerer was not a converted man.

“Thy money perish with thee!” is pretty strong language to use with a believer. He had neither “part or lot in this matter” (“this word”) and his heart was not right before God.

While it is not out of place for believers to repent (see Rev. 2–3), the command to repent is usually given to unbelievers. The word *thought* in Acts 8:22 means “plot or scheme” and is used in a bad sense.

The fact that Simon was “in the gall of bitterness” (Deut. 29:18; Heb. 12:15) and “the bond of iniquity” would indicate that he had never truly been born again.

Simon’s response to these severe words of warning was not at all encouraging. He was more concerned about avoiding judgment than getting right with God!

This episode only shows how close a person can come to salvation and still not be converted. Simon heard the Gospel, saw the miracles, gave a profession of faith in Christ, and was baptized; and yet he was never born again. He was one of Satan’s clever counterfeits; and, had Peter not exposed the wickedness of his heart, Simon would have been accepted as a member of the Samaritan congregation!

Even though the persecution was still going on, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the Gospel in “many villages of the Samaritans” as they went their way. They lost no opportunity to share the Good News with others now that the doors were open in Samaria.

4. A Concerned Seeker—an Ethiopian (Acts 8:26–40)

Philip was not only a faithful preacher; he was also an obedient personal worker.

The angel could have told this Ethiopian official how to be saved, but God has not given the commission to angels. He has given it to His people.

NOTE: Angels have never personally experienced God’s grace; therefore, they can never bear witness of what it means to be saved.

D.L. Moody once asked a man about his soul, and the man replied, “It’s none of your business!” “Oh, yes, it is my business!” Moody said; and the man immediately exclaimed, “Then you must be D.L. Moody!” It is every Christian’s business to share the Gospel with others, and to do it without fear or apology.

This court official did not come from what we know today as Ethiopia; his home was in ancient Nubia, located south of Egypt. Since he was a eunuch, he could not become a full Jewish proselyte (Deut. 23:1); but he was permitted to become a “God fearer” or “a proselyte of the gate.” He was concerned enough about his spiritual life to travel over 200 miles to Jerusalem to worship God; but his heart was still not satisfied.

This Ethiopian represents many people today who are religious, read the Scriptures, and seek the truth, yet do not have saving faith in Jesus Christ. They are sincere, but they are lost! They need someone to show them the way.

As Philip drew near to the chariot, he heard the man reading from the Prophet Isaiah. (It was customary in those days for students to read out loud.)

God had already prepared the man’s heart to receive Philip’s witness!

Isaiah 53 was the passage he was reading, the prophecy of God’s Suffering Servant.

Isaiah 53 describes:

1. Jesus in His birth (Isa. 53:1–2)
2. Life and ministry (Isa. 53:3)
3. Substitutionary death (Isa. 53:4–9)
4. Victorious resurrection (Isa. 53:10–12)

Isaiah 53:4 should be connected with 1 Peter 2:24

Isaiah 53:7 with Matthew 26:62–63

Isaiah 53:9 with Matthew 27:57–60

Isaiah 53:12 with Luke 23:34, 37

The Ethiopian focused on Isaiah 53:7–8, which describes our Lord as the willing Sacrifice for sinners, even to the point of losing His human rights. As Philip explained the verses to him, the Ethiopian began to understand the Gospel because the Spirit of God was opening his mind to God’s truth.

It is not enough for the lost sinner to desire salvation; he must also understand God's plan of salvation. It is the heart that understands the Word that eventually bears fruit (Matt. 13:23).

“Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God” (Rom. 10:17).

- The Ethiopian believed on Jesus Christ and was born again!
- So real was his experience that he insisted on stopping the caravan and being baptized immediately!

Throughout the Book of Acts, baptism is an important part of the believer's commitment to Christ and witness for Christ.

Acts 8:8 - Philip was caught away to minister elsewhere, but the treasurer “went on his way rejoicing”

Philip ended up at Azotus, about twenty miles from Gaza; and then made his way to Caesarea, a journey of about sixty miles. Like Peter and John, Philip “preached his way home” (Acts 8:25) as he told others about the Savior. Twenty years later, we find Philip living in Caesarea and still serving God as an evangelist (Acts 21:8ff).

As you trace the expansion of the Gospel during this transition period (Acts 2–10), you see how the Holy Spirit reaches out to the whole world. In Acts 8, the Ethiopian who was converted was a descendant of Ham (Gen. 10:6, where “Cush” refers to Ethiopia).

In **Acts 9**, Saul of Tarsus will be saved, a Jew and therefore a descendant of Shem (Gen. 10:21ff). In **Acts 10**, the Gentiles find Christ, and they are the descendants of Japheth (Gen. 10:2–5). The whole world was peopled by Shem, Ham, and Japheth (Gen. 10:1); and God wants the whole world—all of their descendants—to hear the message of the Gospel (Matt. 28:18–20; Mark 16:15).

A Story To Think About.

In October 1857, J. Hudson Taylor began to minister in Ningpo, China, and he led a Mr. Nyi to Christ. The man was overjoyed and wanted to share his faith with others.

“How long have you had the good tidings in England?” Mr. Nyi asked Hudson Taylor one day. Taylor acknowledged that England had known the Gospel for many centuries.

“My father died seeking the truth,” said Mr. Nyi. “Why didn't you come sooner?”

Taylor had no answer to that penetrating question.

How long have *you* known the Gospel? How far have you shared it personally?

Home Work

1. Questions 1 and 5 will help you compare the two episodes in 8.4–25 and 8.26–40.

a. In 8.4–25, who is evangelized, convinced, and baptized?

b. What do the Jews think of these people (John 4.9)?

c. How is this group's conversion significant to the progress of the gospel?

d. What convinces this group to become believers (8.6–8, 12)?

e. what is the apostles role in bringing this group into the church (8.14–17)?

2. What was so terrible about Simon's request in 8.18–19?

3. Why do you think Luke recorded the episode with Simon? What does it add to the story of Acts?

4. Keep question 1 in mind as you answer these questions.

a. Who accepted the gospel in 8.26-40?

b. What status did this kind of person have with the Jews (Deuteronomy 23.1)?

c. How was this person's conversion significant to the progress of the gospel (Psalms 68.31, Isaiah 56.3-5, Ephesians 2.11-18)?

d. What was the apostles role in taking the step to permit such a person into the church? Why is this important?

e. What convinced this person to be baptized (8.35)?

5. Summarize what 8.4-40 contributes to the overall message of Acts.

6. How is this section relevant to your life?

7. Can you add anything to Page 24-25 of your notes?