

Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 7

Day One: The Gospel Thrives

As evangelism grew and gained momentum, so did the growing opposition effort against it. In Acts 8:1, we find the first mention in scripture of the word *persecution*. While the apostles remained in Jerusalem for the time being, many Christians were becoming scattered, taking the gospel message with them to the outer regions of Judea and Samaria. Literally on the run for their lives, we imagine these men and women grabbing their children along with whatever possessions they could carry with them and fleeing in earnest. On the run and fearing for their lives, they continued to remain faithful to Christ, proclaiming His message wherever they went.

After the death of Stephen, Luke draws our attention to two contrasting individuals: Saul, who led the charge to not only defeat but destroy the church; and Philip, who personified the message of the new life in Christ he boldly went forward to proclaim.

Read Acts 8:1–40.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord. Write down your first impressions below.

Memory verse: 2 Corinthians 5:17 Write out the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

The death of Stephen dealt a devastating blow to the church, but while believers were grieving, instead of being halted by persecution, the gospel was being jettisoned forth.

1. What was Saul's reaction to Stephen's death? What did he begin doing to the church? Vv. 1-3
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2. Compare Acts 8:1 and 4 with that of Acts 1:8. How were the present happenings actually the result of God's will?
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3. Personal: Is there any opposition in your life right now? Think about it: how can you view and deal with that opposition in light of what you are studying? Please explain.
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Day Two: Counterfeit in Samaria

Read Acts 8:5-25 for review.

In this passage Luke mentions Philip for the second time. Previously (6:5) he was one of seven leaders appointed to handle the daily ministry of food to the widows in the church. Now as Saul was vigorously making havoc of the church in Jerusalem, Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ: *And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did* (v. 6).

1. In contrast to Stephen's eloquence in preaching, what does Luke emphasize about Philip's preaching? Vv. 5-8
2. Another man is mentioned—Simon the sorcerer—who also astonished the people of Samaria. How did he view himself? How did the people view him? Vv. 9-11
3. Luke seems to distinguish between the fact that the people "heeded" (gave serious attention to) Simon, but that they "believed" Philip (v. 12) when he preached. What resulted from them believing?

A quick read of this story prompts us to be as surprised as the Samaritan's were that Simon also believed and was baptized. But it begs the question: was this magician sorcerer truly convicted and converted?

4. Given a little background about Simon's occupation and estimation of himself, what *may* have been the motive behind Simon's profession of faith and baptism?

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that the people in Samaria had received the gospel message they sent Peter and John to them (Vv. 14–17). Why? Certainly not to make less of Philip’s ministry; rather the Jerusalem leaders affirmed his ministry. Philip was a layman with no experience in dealing with new converts. His example of submitting to the authority of Peter and John is a beautiful example to the church today of inexperienced younger believers yielding to more mature older Christians as a model of unity. These newborn believers in Samaria were edified by the presence of experienced Christians from Jerusalem as they laid hands on them and prayed for the Holy Spirit.

5. What was Simon’s reaction to the evidence of spiritual gifts in operation by Peter and John (Vv. 18–19)?
 - a. What was Peter’s response to Simon? Why? Vv. 20–24
 - b. What offer of hope did Peter extend to Simon? Do *you* think Simon repented?
 - c. Simon attempted to use the Holy Spirit’s gifts for his own purpose but failed. How might his story serve as a warning today?

It’s interesting to note that the term *simony* originated with this event. The dictionary defines it as the *traffic of sacred things for monetary gain* and actually mentions Simon’s offer to Peter. Peter’s statement about Simon’s money perishing along with him was not a final condemnation; he offered Simon the opportunity to repent. Simon’s request of grace for sale revealed he may have understood the gospel message but not the grace of God because he had a counterfeit response to it. In the end, Simon feared the consequence but there is no indication he actually repented, which means to turn around and go in the opposite direction by changing one’s ways.

6. Think about it: the act of believing the truth does not guarantee true conversion. Like the apostles, many of the people in Jesus’ day believed the signs and wonders He did but they were not converted: *He did not commit Himself to them because He knew all men* (John 2:23–25). Have *you* truly repented by turning from *your* sin and going the one true way of faith in Jesus Christ?

Day Three: Convert in the Desert

Read Acts 8:26–40 for review.

How does anyone find Jesus? Luke answers that question in the passage before us. But the real answer can be found in the pages of the Old Testament: *You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart* (Jeremiah 29:13).

1. No one is out of God’s reach when the heart is set on knowing Him. How did the Lord direct Philip to the place where he would meet the Ethiopian eunuch?
 - a. Describe the man Philip was sent out to meet. Why had he been to Jerusalem?
 - b. What was this official doing when Philip met up with him?

- c. What did Philip ask him? How did he respond?

This official knew that the passage from Isaiah 53 was significant but he did not know of whom it referred. As Philip sat with him he opened his mouth and beginning at Isaiah 53, preached Jesus to him.

- d. What request did the man make of Philip and what condition did Philip place on him?

After hearing of the eunuch's statement of faith, the chariot stopped and the two went down into the water where Philip baptized him. *When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing.* We must note that it was not baptism that saved the man; it was his faith in Christ. Baptism is an outward step of obedience responding to an inward change of the heart that has taken place by faith. Old things have passed away, a new creation in Christ is revealed.

Why would Philip leave an already successful ministry going on in Samaria? Simple: because God told him to go! And his spiritual detour saved a man's soul and allowed Philip to continue preaching in all the cities until he arrived in Caesarea. What if Philip had said no? God would've found someone else and Philip would have missed an opportunity.

2. Personal: What about *you*? Do you hear those subtle gentle promptings here and there telling you to speak to someone? It could be in a café or an airport or a hospital. You see a stranger, perceive a need, and realize you have the answer. Are you ready? You should be. What does Peter instruct the believer in 1 Peter 3:15? Write it out below.

Keep getting ready—God wants to use *you* to deliver His message of salvation!

Day Four:

Saul the Persecutor

As we get our first glimpse into the Apostle Paul's early life, we find him known by his Jewish name, *Saul*, which comes from the Hebrew *Shaul*, meaning *asked*. Later on in Acts 13 we will see him called by his Christian name of Paul. The transition from one name to another took place when he committed his life to Christ. The word Paul means *little*, as he chose to be recognized as the *little one* in Christ's service. It marks the turning point from his affiliation with his former countrymen to his new commission as *apostle* to the Gentiles.

Saul was a native of Tarsus, a city of Cilicia (Acts 21:39; 22:3) and was of pure Jewish descent, of the tribe of Benjamin (Philippians 3:5). We find no mention of his mother in Scripture, with the information regarding his father being minimal; mainly that he was a Pharisee (Acts 23:6) and that from him Saul inherited the rights of Roman citizenship (Acts 22:28). It will help us to better understand his life and teaching if we remember that he was first a Hebrew by birth, a Roman citizen by right, and a Pharisee of the highest order. As was the custom of the Jews that all boys learn a trade, Saul learned to make tents (Acts 18:3) from the haircloth supplied by the goats of his native province and sold in the local marketplace. At the proper age of thirteen he went to Jerusalem to pursue his religious studies. It was there he became a student of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), under whose mentoring Saul grew in his understanding and observance of the law.

We will have many opportunities to study up close the life of Saul. For now, we will take a retrospective look back at it from his writings. This will set the stage for the dynamic dramatic ministry that is about to unfold.

1. In Paul's letter to the Philippians he wrote about his life before meeting Christ. Read Philippians 3:4–10 and in a sentence or two state your findings.

- a. Who he was:

- b. What he did:

- c. What motivated him after meeting Christ:

2. In looking back . . . from *your* believer's perspective, what are some facts about *you* before you met Christ? What were some of the things you considered important before becoming a Christian? How do you feel about those things today?

Deeper Discoveries ~

Verse 10 presents the ultimate goal of every sinner saved by grace. In your own words, what is the lesson in each of the following? As you define each one ask yourself in the form of a question: *do I know Him; His power; His sufferings; am I being conformed into His likeness?*

- a. *That I may know Him*–

- b. *And the power of His resurrection*–

- c. *And the fellowship of His sufferings*–

- d. *Being conformed to His death*–

- e. *I press on that I may lay hold . . . (v. 12)*–

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Compose a prayer asking God to help you as you keep getting ready to share His good news.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.
