

# Philip the Deacon

## Lesson 11

### Acts 8:1-25

As we begin this chapter, a man is mentioned that will be seen a great deal in later chapters. Here, he is still called by his Hebrew name, Saul. Later, he will be known more by his Gentile name, Paul.

As the last chapter ended, Stephen was brutally attacked and killed by those who refused to hear the message of Jesus Christ. He had eloquently defended Christ using the Old Testament history of the Jewish nation from Abraham to their time. Just as Peter had done, he had accused them of rejecting the Messiah and crucifying Him.

The difference is that this crowd had been stirred up by Saul into a mob. He hated the church and would do anything to stop its obvious growth. It's not too hard to stir up a crowd if you know the right buttons to push. He knew well what to do and did it. Stephen was murdered by stoning.

Those who loved him and stood with him carried his body for burial. They knew where he had gone, but still would miss him as their leader.

What would happen now? When a leader is removed, often a movement is destroyed. Usually, followers scatter for fear of reprisal, and fade back into the crowd.

Not this time, however. The leader was not Stephen, but the Holy Spirit of God. Stephen's death did not slow down the growth of the church, but it actually fueled it to greater growth. As soon as Stephen was taken, another came to the forefront—Philip. Again, he was just a simple layman who was willing to be led by the Spirit of God.

With the death of Stephen, Saul seems to have gone into a frenzy. He ramped up his persecution of the church of Jesus Christ. All this was sanctioned by the Council in Jerusalem. The people were dragged from their houses and put into prison. I have no doubt that many died at the hands of cruel men. The idea was to stamp out this “blasphemy” before it could spread more.

This persecution, however, had just the opposite effect. As the persecution in Jerusalem and the surrounding area increased, the believers in Christ ran for the sake of their lives and their families. Only the apostles were left in Jerusalem. Everywhere the believers went and resettled, they began to share the gospel. Churches sprang up. People were being saved. Instead of stamping the gospel of Christ out, the opposite effect was happening, just as had happened with the death of Stephen.

There are different words for “scattered” in Greek. One means dispersed so that the item is gone from that point on, like scattering a person's ashes on the ocean's waves. That is not the word used here in verses 1 and 4. The word used here means scattered in order to be planted. It is exactly like the Hebrew word *jezreel*, meaning “scattered” but also “planted.” It is what God did with Israel, scattering

the Jews throughout the world because of their sin; but he also brought them back and planted them in their land. The disciples were scattered as a result of the persecution. But all the leaders did by scattering the disciples was to plant them in the places to which they had been scattered, for there they “preached the word” (v. 4).<sup>1</sup>

Someone has said that the blood of martyrs is the seed for the church to grow. So is persecution and adversity. Over and over in history, the church has thrived and grown in adversity. During times of prosperity and peace for the church, it has grown weak and declined. God knows that truth better than we. He often allows such adversity to wake up the church and call us to arms.

From that point on, strange things began to happen in the church.

*NKJV Acts 8:5* <sup>5</sup>*Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them.*

What is so strange about that? It is that Jews would have nothing to do with Samaritans and vice versa. The ethnic hatred was strong and had been for centuries. Samaritans were the hated half-breeds of the Jewish nation. The history goes all the way back to 722 B.C. when the Northern Kingdom was overrun by the Assyrians.

So why would Philip go to them? The man was filled with the Holy Spirit of God, and was led there. When he went there, an even stranger thing happened—they received him and received the message of Christ. Maybe it was because Philip was Hellenistic and spoke Greek. We are not told. But there was a great revival there, even greater than when Christ spoke to the Samaritan woman by the well. Even a sorcerer named Simon made a profession of faith. He was famous as one who could do miracles.

There was such a stir that word got to Jerusalem and to the apostles. With this, Peter and John were sent to see what was happening and that the gospel was being truthfully preached. I wonder if they were suspicious, or were they simply amazed at the reports. After all, these were Samaritans.

At any rate, when they saw the amazing work of God, they prayed for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit. So, now it is happening as Jesus told them. First, they were to carry the gospel to Jerusalem and Judea, then to Samaria. Later, it would go to the uttermost part of the earth, as Jesus had instructed.

This “receiving of the Holy Spirit” caught Simon’s attention. As a sorcerer, he had had the people of the city in the palm of his hand. Now, this was being taken away as the gospel was spreading and the people were leaving him for the church.

Just a side note: Does this mean they spoke in tongues (languages) as did the Jews at Pentecost? Possibly, but we are not told that. In fact, it would seem that if so, Luke would have mentioned this as he did at the house of Cornelius (Acts 10). Either way, there was something that caught the eye of Simon, and he wanted that power Peter portrayed by the laying on of hands.

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<sup>1</sup> James Montgomery Boice, [Acts: An Expository Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 133.

So, did Simon get saved? I don't think so. Actually, I believe this is an example of what Jesus taught in the parable of the sower. The soil is not the same with everyone who hears. All of us who have been in ministry very long are aware that some people make professions of faith and are not truly saved. In fact, some make professions of faith and think they are saved, but are not. Deceived by the devil, they continue depending on an emotional experience, or something else for their salvation. These are usually ripe for the devil to lead into a cult or some other false teaching. People like this may be the sadist of all!

The problem is that we can't see into a person's heart. We can only take their profession. We can see if their life lines up with their profession, but only that. It is not our job to separate the wheat from the tares (weeds), it is our job to tell the good news, and to build up the disciples (Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43). Usually, the tares will slowly drift out of a Bible preaching congregation. They will look for a church that makes them feel good about their profession.

What happens next makes clear the empty profession of Simon. Simon Peter vs. Simon the sorcerer—Simon vs. Simon. Seems like a fight would be about to happen, but no fight. No one or nothing is a match for God. Simon the sorcerer never had a chance.

He did finally get enough courage to ask Peter to sell him the secret to this power of laying on hands and giving to people the Holy Spirit. He thought as he always did that it must be some trick or magic. It never dawned on him that it could be of God and actually be real. After all, he had convinced people that HE was god by using his magic tricks. Surely this must be the same, but with a new secret.

It is sad how many people think Christianity is only some magic trick to bring them what they want. If they want their bills paid, just get saved. If they want God to fix their marriage, bring their husband or wife back, just get saved. If they want to stop spousal abuse, just get saved. If they want prosperity, just get saved. If they want healing, just get saved. Getting saved is not some "key to the kingdom." It is not some vending machine where you simply put in the "coin" and out comes a miracle. God is not a dancing monkey who will dance to our tune. HE IS GOD!

Others think that Christianity is just an invention of man to make us feel better about ourselves and find some sense of hope. Nothing could be farther from the truth. What Jesus offers is really real. It is not an emotional crutch, but truth.

What Peter said next is, for us in our day, quite astounding. We are so afraid that we may hurt someone's feelings.

***NKJV Acts 8:20–23** <sup>20</sup>But Peter said to him, "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! <sup>21</sup>You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. <sup>22</sup>Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. <sup>23</sup>For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity."*

I said we could often tell by the lives of those who make professions. Jesus made it clear that false teachers could be exposed by their fruit (lives and converts—Matthew 7). Peter saw that this man was nothing more than a greedy charlatan.

He was only interested in going back to the same racket he had before, only with this so-called new magic. He had no change of heart, but only empty profession.

His response to Peter makes it even clearer. He did not fall on his face and repent to God with tears, but rather wimpishly asked Peter to pray for him. If he had had a real relationship with God, he would have besought the Lord for forgiveness.

What a sad case for us to see. The Holy Spirit made sure we had this to go by. If a person is unwilling to leave the sin of his previous life, it is for us to watch and pray for that person. Also, we are to help them to break the former habits through the power of God and build them up in the faith. Bad lifestyles can be broken only by the power of the Holy Spirit in us. Our God is still in the LIFE CHANGING BUSINESS!

Salvation is about changing lives. We have seen the “easy believism” that became so popular in the last half of the twentieth century do great damage. “All you have to do is believe,” became the mantra. No talk of repentance or discipleship. Just believe! That is not Bible! It is a false doctrine. All too many are convinced they are saved when there has been no repentance, no discipleship.

#### Things to learn from this passage”

1. God uses ordinary people. We do not have to be super-Christians to be used of God. Anyone willing to let the Spirit lead can and will be used to do great things. After all, it is God who does the great things, not us. In and of ourselves we are helpless.
2. Ethnic differences should never hinder the gospel. We are of “one-blood” no matter the color, language, geographical background, economic status, or any other difference. Tall, short, young, or old are all loved by God. If God loves someone, so should we. We may not like all people, but we need to love all people. If that person you care little for gets saved, who knows what will happen? That person may become your best friend.
3. God changes lives. When a person claims to be saved, look for life change. It may not be drastic at first. In fact, from our perspective, it may not be drastic. But God will start to make a marked difference in the life of that new Christian, who is a “new creation.”
4. Greed is one of the foulest sins of all. It becomes so ingrained in us that God has to dig it out. Greed must be turned to grace, or greed will destroy a person, no matter their profession.
5. A person with an empty profession may not be evident at first. Philip apparently did not see the empty profession until Peter and John came. We can't see inside, only God can. We take a person at their word until it becomes evident otherwise.
6. Share the gospel wherever you go. Not only did Philip share the gospel in a strange city, but Peter and John preached in other towns and villages of Samaria on their way back to Jerusalem (verse 25).