

**Armagh Baptist Church**  
**Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> September 2009 - 11:30am**  
**Acts 8:1-25**

**Introduction**

Acts ch.8 opens with one of Dr Luke's summary verses, giving us an up-date on how the early church was doing. He does this at various points throughout his book. But this is a significant turning point, as we saw last Sunday. Because on the day that Stephen was stoned to death as the first Christian martyr, it was...

*(8:1-3) 'On that day [that] a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to **destroy** the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.'*

One man, called Saul of Tarsus, began to wreak havoc on the New Testament Church, doing all in his power to stamp it out, and bring it to nothing.

**The split between Judaism and Christianity had finally come!**

We are a quarter of the way through the Book of Acts, but now the early church is no longer part of Judaism – it has been 'put outside the camp'!

No longer would the early Christians be able to regard themselves simply as believing Jews, or Messianic Jews, or worship at the Temple in Jerusalem. Now they were being scattered, now they were on the run, now they had to fend for themselves, and now they had to watch their backs every day.

**But as I said last Sunday, they had Jesus *in their hearts***, and despite the consequences they faced, he was often ***on their lips*** as well – because wherever they went, they talked about Him (v.4) - they shared their faith. So even though the church was being severely persecuted, and many were losing their lives, yet the Gospel was continuing to spread.

The Spiritual Battle was really heating up between the Devil and the Church, but God was at work, and God's People were still obeying Christ's command to tell the world about Jesus, and to make disciples wherever they went.

It was Rebecca Manley Pippert who wrote the book 'Out of the Salt-shaker' in the 1980s. It was a book all about personal evangelism, making the point that instead of being a holy huddle always in the company of other Christians, that God had called us as Christians to be salt in society at large. Salt, if it is to have its desired effect, needs to get out of the salt-shaker, in order to touch the food it is to savour. Jesus also said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matt 5:13-16 – '*You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.*' – So the question is, have we lost our

saltiness, as Christians? If we are to be of any use or influence in society to bring men and women to Christ, then we need to get out of the salt-shake (out of our churches) and into contact with those all around us, if the work of evangelism is to be accomplished.

Well, the salt-shaker of the Church in Jerusalem had just been up-ended. Now the salt was out into society at large, and the areas around Jerusalem – Judea and Samaria - were about to feel the effects. In this passage this morning, we are going to see Philip going down to Samaria and telling the **Samaritans** about Jesus, and before the end of this chapter, i.e. next Sunday morning we're going to see him talking to an **Ethiopian**, and through him the Gospel will go to **Africa**! So we're on the verge of a major expansion of the Church as we enter Acts ch.8.

It is estimated that there were probably around 20,000 believers in the Jerusalem Church by the time Stephen became the first Christian martyr. The last number that Luke recorded for us was in Acts 4:4 where he talked about 5000 men besides women and children being part of the church. So add a similar number of women, and the same again in male and female young people, and 20,000 wouldn't be too far off the mark. We're certainly talking about a minimum of 10,000 people being scattered.

As Saul began his fierce persecution of the Christians in the first three verses of Acts ch.8, he had no idea that he was simply tipping the salt-shaker and scattering the Christians, and 'those who had been scattered, preached the word (or gossiped the gospel) wherever they went.' But notice that v.1 says,

***'All except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.'***

So it was the ordinary '5'8" believers, the rank and file, not the apostolic leaders, who were scattered. That's who was gossiping the gospel, or preaching the good news, wherever they went. And there were some fine people among them. One of them was Philip, another one of the deacons of Acts 6:5, who was also a colleague of Stephen. He too was humble enough to do the menial tasks, like waiting on tables, but his gifts went far beyond that. Philip, in the Lord's hands, became a powerful evangelist in Acts ch.8.

He became the man, in God's hands, to bring the Gospel to the Samaritans. Remember the Commission Jesus gave his apostles in Acts 1:8.

***'You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'***

That verse doesn't just give us another version of the Great Commission, it actually gives us Dr Luke's structure for his book: the Acts of the Apostles. We have seen the first stage in chs.1-7 – witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea. Now we are about to enter the second phase of that mission – the mission to the Samaritans from Acts 8:5 onwards.

Here the Gospel is no longer just for the Jews (although the Apostles will continue to preach it to Jews wherever they find them) - but since the Jewish religious leaders on the Sanhedrin have so blatantly rejected the Gospel when they murdered Stephen, now it will be openly declared to Samaritans (ch.8) and eventually to Gentiles (ch.10) as well.

The Samaritans were in fact half-Jew and half-Gentile. The Samaritans in New Testament times were the descendants of the 10 Northern Tribes of Israel who had been over-run by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. They had inter-married with foreign nationalities and lost their Jewish distinctiveness and that's why the Jews in Judea around Jerusalem had little or no time for them. They were seen as mixed race – half Jew and half Gentile, therefore '*Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans*' (John 4:9).

But, following His Lord's example in John ch.4, Philip too goes down to a city in Samaria and he '*proclaimed the Christ there.*' (Acts 8:5).

And his preaching met with immediate success! (vs.6-8)

*'When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. So there was great joy in that city.'*

The response was almost like it was in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost back in Acts ch.2. Thousands must have responded to what he was saying!

- They heard what he preached – Christ
- They saw the miracles he performed – 'signs' backing up his message
- Demons were cast out
- The paralysed and lame were healed
- And great joy came to that city!

Philip's preaching led to the conversion of many Samaritans to Christ, but notice the tone of v.9 - The account of Simon's profession of faith is in some way different to the rest of the Samaritans who trusted in Christ.

The Samaritans were making genuine professions of faith, but Simon's story is recorded here to show us the danger of making a false profession of faith. It's a bit like the story of Ananias & Sapphira that we saw in Acts ch.5 right at the start of the Jewish phase of the Gospel's expansion. Here, right at the start of the Samaritan phase we have another case of false profession of faith.

### **1. Who was Simon? (vs.9-11)**

(v.9) – He was a sorcerer or magician. Obviously Satanic activity behind him.  
- He claimed to be someone great.

- He astonished or 'bewitched' the people of Samaria.  
(v.10) – He had all Samaria deluded, from the least of them to the greatest, '*both high and low*' and they thought that he was 'The Great Power!'  
(v.11) – They had been amazed by his magic for quite a long time.

### **2. What happened to Simon? (v.12)**

Simon had obviously lost a lot of his following when Philip came to town, '*preaching the good news of the kingdom of God.*'

Simon had held Samaria in the dominion of Satan and probably did his magic in Satan's name, but God had just released and saved these people from Satan's grasp! You can imagine that the Devil wasn't too pleased!

Philip had come preaching '*The Kingdom of God*' and the power of '*The name of Jesus*'. Simon's magic only exalted himself – whereas Philip's miracles exalted Jesus Christ.

The people believed Philip, and trusted in Christ, and both men and women were baptised. Simon had lost his following, and probably his popularity too.

### **3. What does Simon do? (v.13)**

Well, was it a case of, 'If you can't beat them; join them'? Because we read in (v.13) '*Simon himself believed and was baptised.*'!

But why did he begin to follow Philip?

(v.13b) Because he was amazed by the ***miracles and signs*** Philip could do!

There is no mention here of Simon being interested in the message of the Gospel – the Word of God. The rest of the people of Samaria, according to v.6, had '*all paid close attention to what Philip said.*' But this is not recorded of Simon! He is completely taken up with the miracles that Philip had done. There is no record of him repenting of his sin, or of him burning his magic paraphernalia, as was the case later on in Ephesus in Acts 19:18-20.

Simon had made a profession of faith, but it would soon prove to be a false profession, because...

### **4. The Apostles came to Samaria and exposed him (vs.14-17)**

News soon got back to the Apostles in Jerusalem that remarkable things were happening down in Samaria, and that the Samaritans were accepting Christ in large numbers.

This was totally new to them, so Peter & John, two of the Apostles, were dispatched to investigate what was going on (v.14).

N.B. Philip wasn't an independent evangelist accountable to no-one. He was accountable to the leaders back in the Jerusalem Church, as we should all be accountable to the elders that God has now entrusted to his church.

When Peter & John arrived, they prayed for the Samaritan believers to receive the Holy Spirit (read vs.15-17). This begs the question...

#### **5. Why did the Samaritans not receive the Spirit when they believed?**

This is a question that is often asked.

The answer is because God wanted to show the Jewish believers, especially the Apostles, that He was accepting the Samaritans into the New Testament Church, alongside the Jewish believers, on exactly the same basis – upon profession of their faith in the Lord Jesus and baptism.

God was uniting the age-old enemies – Samaritans and Jews – together in Christ – into one church. Not a 'Jewish Church' based in Jerusalem and a 'Samaritan Church' based in Samaria, that would be separate from each other – but 'God's Church' – a church made up of people from all backgrounds, now united by their faith in Christ alone.

That's why the Holy Spirit was with-held until the Apostles were there to witness it for themselves.

In fact Peter was also present to witness the Holy Spirit being given to the Gentiles too in Acts 10:44-48. For Peter's role in all of this, we need to look back to Matthew 16:13-20. Faith in '*Christ as the Son of the Living God*' was the basis for the church. That was the rock upon which the church of Jesus Christ would be built. And when Jesus said, 'You are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church' he was referring to that basic foundational belief, not to Peter as a person.

But when Jesus went on to say to Peter '*I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of heaven*' could it be that he was referring to these occasions in Acts, when Peter would be physically present to witness the expansion of the Gospel, first of all to the Jews (Acts 2), then to the Samaritans (Acts 8) and finally to the Gentiles (Acts 10)? Peter as one of the leading Apostles was to perform that key role of keeping them all together.

God was destroying age-old divisions by uniting Samaritan and Jew together through faith in Jesus Christ. He can do the same today in Ireland, as he unites Catholic and Protestant together, as they each come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and are born again. And He can do the same anywhere in the world where there are age-old divisions.

#### **6. But what about Simon? (v.18)**

Simon had watched this 'great trick' which Peter and John had performed. He had watched them giving the Holy Spirit to these new believers, at the laying on of hands, and he wanted to be able to do it too! In fact, he wanted it so much, not to lose his standing in Samaria, that he offered the Apostles money, if they would show him how to do it! He wanted to buy the ability to give the Holy Spirit at the laying on of his hands!!

Simon only wanted what would glorify himself. He was still only interested in magic! There had been no real change in his life at all. His life was still geared to money and magic! His had been a false profession of faith!

#### **7. Peter's condemnation exposes Simon for who he was (vs.20-23).**

(v.20) – '*Your money perish with you!*' Do you know what that literally means? It means, '*To hell with you and your money!*' That sounds very strong to us... But Peter was pronouncing a curse on Simon, by the authority Christ had given him back in Matthew 16.

If Simon had truly been a believer, Peter would never have said such a thing to him. Peter reminded Simon that salvation is a gift from God – it can't be bought with money (v.20b). As so many today are still trying to do, by 'paying into their church.'

He then reminds Simon of the key to getting right with God (v.21). It's not by making an outward profession of faith, or even by getting baptised publicly. It is a matter of the heart! '***For your heart is not right in the sight of God!***' The question I need to ask you, is yours? Is your heart right with God? Have you made a genuine or a false profession of faith?

But even for false professors of faith, there is still hope (v.22).

***'Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord.  
Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart.  
For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.'***

***'Perhaps...'*** – Don't presume upon God's mercy, but get down on your knees and plead for forgiveness: Repent of your sin, pray to God, and ask for forgiveness. Have you done that?

If your profession of faith is genuine, then you shouldn't still be '*full of bitterness*' or be '*captive to sin*'. Are you? If so, seek the Lord afresh today!

#### **8. This prompts the following reaction from Simon (v.24)**

***'Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me.'***  
But sadly it's unconvincing:

- He still isn't able, or prepared, to pray for himself.
- He was more concerned about escaping the consequences, than of getting down on his knees, repenting of his sin, and getting his heart right before God!

### **Conclusion**

Unless you are prepared to forsake your past life of sin, and repent, and get your heart sorted out before God, then you, like Simon, will be lost!  
You could be so close to the kingdom, and yet so far away.

Are you trusting in your baptism – infant or immersion – to save you?

Are you trusting in paying into your church, to save you?

Are you trusting in a profession of faith you made as a child, that hasn't really made much difference in your life since, to save you?

Or do you have an up-to-date walk with God that is characterised by repentance, and the joy of forgiveness? That's what will save you.

Sometimes people ask us why we hold off on baptism for new converts until a period of time has passed by. Why do we not baptise people the same day as they believe in Jesus, just like they did in the New Testament.

Well, I suppose Simon here is a case in point.

He went ahead and got baptised at the same time as the other Samaritan believers were doing so. Maybe he just went along with the crowd?

It might have been better if Simon had held off for a while, until there was real evidence in his life that he truly had repented of his sin, and that there was a noticeable change in his life.

A number of people have got saved over the last few months here in Armagh. And a number of others who have been saved for a while have asked for baptism. We have a baptismal service approaching on Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> October.

I want to encourage believers to be baptised, but I also want each candidate for baptism to examine their own hearts and lives. Make sure that you really are right with God, through repentance and faith in Christ, before you take this step of obedience and testimony before the watching world.

I don't want to put anybody off, but please think seriously about this matter, before you take this next step in your walk with God.

May Simon be a warning to us all!

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