

Acts ~ Reimagine

Acts 8:4-40

The first few verses of Acts 8, which is where we ended last week, describe the first systematic persecution of the Church, apparently spear-headed by a guy named Saul, who Luke tells us very little about...for now.

For now, the persecution was contained within Jerusalem. So the early Christians, sans the apostles, “...scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.” (8:1) You’ll recall from Acts 1:8 (which forms the outline of the book) that the early followers of Jesus would be “...witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” We have come to that transition where the focus of the witnessing shifts from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria. Who would have thought that persecution would be the catalyst for the expansion/advancement? But Luke makes it clear, “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.” (8:4) Oh the irony. What Saul meant to destroy only led to its spread.

With the apostles staying in Jerusalem, the focus shifts to one of the Seven who were appointed back in chapter 6...Philip. But before we jump into the adventures of Philip, let’s pause for a moment to consider more fully what being “scattered” included. Luke doesn’t elaborate much on the experience of those scattered...he keeps moving forward with the story. But I think it’s worth our time to imagine what such an experience would have been like. We actually have a name for people/families who are suddenly displaced from their homes under threat of violence and go searching for new, safer places to reside...refugees. Imagine all that goes into suddenly/quickly uprooting, leaving all that is familiar, and going who-knows-where. This is what their commitment to Christ has cost them.

Now I suspect that they didn’t scatter in individual/nuclear family units...though it’s understandable why our imaginations would tend to go in that direction, as that’s how we tend to operate. I suspect that their communal/collective life continued...yes, in somewhat smaller units...but likely still relying on each other...because they had to, and it is consistent with their way of life, with their understanding of Kingdom life.

Towns in Judea and Samaria were quite small by our standards...perhaps just a couple hundred people. So I reckon if/when a group of immigrants comes along and even settles in such a town, the curiosity of the townspeople is piqued. That curiosity likely brought opportunity for these displaced Christians to tell their story...i.e. share the Gospel.

OK, on to Philip. I find it interesting that Luke doesn’t name the “city in Samaria” (8:4) that Philip went to. Did he not know the name of the town? That seems odd for such a researched historian like Luke. Did he withhold the name for a reason? We can only speculate. But I find it interesting nonetheless.

Most of us are familiar with the idea that Jews and Samaritans didn't like each other. But perhaps we don't have a good grasp on WHY that was the case. Commentator John Stott offers a brief summary, "...the hostility between Jews and Samaritans had lasted a thousand years. It began with the break-up of the monarchy in the tenth century BC when ten tribes defected, making Samaria their capital, and only two tribes remained loyal to Jerusalem. It became steadily worse when Samaria was captured by Assyria in 722 BC, thousands of its inhabitants were deported, and the country was re-populated by foreigners. In the sixth century BC, when the Jews returned to their land [from exile], they refused the help of the Samaritans in the rebuilding of the temple. Not till the fourth century BC, however, did the Samaritan schism harden, with the building of their rival temple on Mount Gerizim and their repudiation of all Old Testament Scripture except the Pentateuch. The Samaritans were despised by the Jews as hybrids in both race and religion, as both heretic and schismatics."

With this background in mind, it demonstrates how significant and scandalous it was for Jesus to accept and relate to Samaritans (see Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, and her village, in John 4; and of course the Parable of the "Good Samaritan"--an oxymoron for a Jew--in Luke 10). The beautiful thing we see in Philip is the continuation of Jesus' ministry to Samaritans.

Luke tells us that Philip "*proclaimed the Christ*" (8:5) and "*performed miraculous signs*" (8:6), that "*they all paid close attention to what he said*" (8:6), and that "*there was great joy in that city*" (8:8). A common question that often arises when people read Acts (and it has come up in some of our Table Groups) is why don't we see miraculous signs like this anymore when it seemed to be commonplace back then...or at least tended to accompany the preaching of the Gospel? That's a good and understandable question. There are a variety of theories on that topic. Most of the theories fall into one of three broad categories/buckets...

- One, miraculous signs were only for the early Church, during the apostolic age, but once the Church was more established and prior to the canon of Scriptures being put together this era of miraculous signs ceased. (Technically this is called Cessationism.) Personally, I don't buy it.
- Two, such miraculous signs/wonders are very much still around--this is known as Continuationism. Personally, this seems much more accurate and true. There are just far too many accounts of signs/miracles to say that they don't or can't happen anymore. But that still doesn't answer the question of why many of us--particularly in the modern West--don't see/experience much of this.
- Three, there is a more nuanced answer to this question. (And a good general rule, I think, is that whenever we find ourselves stuck in a binary--just two opposing options/answers--there's likely a third option.) Yes, miracles still happen. And our observations are also true that, again, particularly in the modern Western context, they don't seem to happen much (or perhaps they are under-reported, or not believed when reported). Many of the stories of the miraculous come from areas where the Gospel

hasn't taken firm root and the Church isn't as established. Interestingly, where we see the Church growing rapidly (in the global south and east) there are all kinds of reports of the miraculous. BUT, there is the option that Christians from the modern West also lack faith/confidence/trust and tend to be more self-reliant and limited by materialistic thinking (which is fruit of the Enlightenment). Additionally, signs and wonders accompanied and confirmed the preaching of the Gospel...so it could be that many modern Western Christians/churches don't actually preach the Gospel. (Ouch, that stings a bit, doesn't it?)

There are no easy answers to that very good question. But I think if we focus on being faithful to King Jesus and filled by His Spirit, whatever needs to happen will happen.

Moving on, we are introduced to a curious character named Simon who was a magician/sorcerer...or practiced magic and sorcery. Hmm, what are we to make of this guy? Was he just a trickster who used sleight of hand and illusions to prey on superstitious people? Or did he have access to some kind of supernatural (perhaps occultic) power? Either way, the people thought he was a big deal...and he seemed to think of himself as a big deal too. (Some "power" is simply the fame/popularity that is given by others...like we see today with people who are famous for being famous...and that kind of celebrity is, oddly, imbued with its own kind of "power".)

Actually, our questions regarding Simon's power are connected with the previous question regarding signs/wonders/miracles in that the line of questions sort of betrays our modern Western prejudices. Is there actually supernatural/spiritual power that some people tap into (and usually take advantage of...and take advantage of others in the process) or is there some sort of physical explanation for whatever Simon did that amazed people so? The Biblical worldview affirms that there is, indeed, supernatural/spiritual power...and it shouldn't be dabbled with. (See Leviticus 19:31, 20:6; Deuteronomy 18:9-14; I Samuel 15:23; Galatians 5:19-21..to name a few.)

Regardless of how impressed the Samaritans were with this Simon fellow, they were even more impressed with Philip. They believed and were baptized, and that included Simon, who also was quite impressed with Philip.

Please notice something: Luke describes the same thing two different ways. He states that Philip "...preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ." (8:12). Then just a couple of verses later he writes, "...Samaria had accepted the word of God..." (8:14). These are two different ways of saying the same thing, two different ways of describing the message that was shared...i.e. the Gospel. Keep an eye out for the various ways the message is described throughout the book.

So here's an interesting and important question: How/when does someone receive the Holy Spirit? As important of a question as this is, it's hard to nail down an answer that is true in every circumstance. Or to say it another way, there seems to be an answer that is generally true; but

then there seem to be occasional exceptions to the rule. (And that's only in what we read in Acts...let alone when we pile on 2000 years of Church history and the various discussions and debates on the topic that have ensued.) And just to show how important/significant of a question this is, take note of this, *"You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you."* (Romans 8:9-11) All that to say, the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian and the Church is a **BIG** deal.

The general pattern (with some notable exceptions) is that we receive the Holy Spirit when we are baptized. (See Acts 2:38.) But here we find one of those notable exceptions. Which begs the question, why was the Holy Spirit not given to the Samaritans upon baptism? Why did Peter and John have to lay hands on them in order to receive the Spirit? Before I attempt to answer that question, here's another puzzling question: How did the apostles know that the Spirit hadn't been received by the Samaritans upon baptism, and how did they know the Spirit had been received when they prayed and laid their hands on them? (And this is not the only place in Acts where this question can be asked.) The only logical answer, speculative though it might be, is that there was some sort of evidence that the Holy Spirit had come and been received. What exactly that evidence was, again, we can only speculate. (Speaking in tongues seems to be a favorite speculation as to the outward sign/evidence/manifestation that the Spirit arrived...but, again, speculative.) I will go out on a limb here and guess that for many/most of us, there was no outward visible sign or evidence that accompanied our receiving of the Spirit. This, too, plays into our earlier question of signs today. (Have fun discussing that in Table Group :)

Just FYI...there are parts/branches of the Church today that have some very definite opinions (they would probably call them doctrines) on this matter. The issue/problem, as I see it, is that these tend to read more into the Scriptures than is warranted. This is why it is vitally important to know the Scriptures...otherwise we're at the mercy of those who claim to know it. Ignorance is not a sufficient tool against bad doctrine/theology. In fact, bad doctrine/theology preys on ignorance. All that to say, my brothers and sisters, don't be ignorant when it comes to the Scriptures.

Back to the question of why this incident was a notable exception. (Though please keep in mind that there are some who would question whether or not this was an exception versus the general pattern.) The reason I, and others, believe that this was a notable exception to the rule is because of the uniqueness of this specific situation. This was the first time non-Jews accepted the Word of God. This was a hallmark moment.

Allow me to lean on John Stott again.

"So why was it necessary for an official apostolic delegation to scrutinize and confirm the work of Philip? And why in any case was the Spirit not given through Philip himself who had done the preaching and baptizing? For what special reason could God have withheld the Spirit? There is

no indication that Philip's teaching was defective. Otherwise the apostles would have supplemented it, whereas what they did was pray for and lay hands on the Samaritans, not instruct them.

The most natural explanation of the delayed gift of the Spirit is that this was the first occasion on which the gospel had been proclaimed not only outside Jerusalem but inside Samaria. This is clearly the importance of the occasion in Luke's unfolding story, since the Samaritans were a kind of half-way house between Jews and Gentiles...

As we saw earlier, the Samaritan schism had lasted for centuries. But now the Samaritans were being evangelized, and were responding to the gospel. It was a moment of significant advance, which was also fraught with great peril. What would happen now? Would the long-standing rift be perpetuated? The gospel had been welcomed by the Samaritans, but would the Samaritans be welcomed by the Jews? Or would there be separate factions of Jewish Christians and Samaritan Christians in the church of Jesus Christ? The idea may seem unthinkable in theory; in practice it might well have happened...

Is it not reasonable to suggest (in view of historical background) that, in order to avoid just such a disaster, God deliberately withheld the Spirit from these Samaritan converts? The delay was only temporary, however, until the apostles had come down to investigate, had endorsed Philip's bold policy of Samaritan evangelism, had prayed for the converts, had laid hands on them as a token of fellowship and solidarity, and had thus given a public sign to the whole church, as well as to the Samaritan converts themselves, that they were bona fide Christians, to be incorporated into the redeemed community on precisely the same terms as Jewish converts."

Again, we will see notable exceptions again, so please keep this rationale in mind when we encounter the next one (Spoiler alert: chapter 10).

So this was a momentous and joyous occasion, one to be celebrated. But it didn't take long for things to go sideways. Back to that Simon guy. Though he too "...believed and was baptized" (8:13), he was very much stuck in his old way of thinking and living. Verse 18, "*When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostle's hands, he offered them money...*" so that he could give people the Spirit also. On one level, if we are trying to be as charitable as we could possibly be, it might seem that what Simon wanted was a good thing...again, being super-charitable here...he wanted people to have/experience the Holy Spirit.

But here's the problem. The Holy Spirit is not a commodity that can be bought and sold. And the giving and receiving of the Holy Spirit isn't something humans (even apostles) get to dictate. This smacks of everything that is wrong with "religion". Even if it was/is well intentioned, this idea is far too corruptible. You may recall that one of the things that Martin Luther and the reformers reacted to in the Protestant Reformation was the buying/selling of "indulgences" by the Catholic Church. That practice, interestingly enough, is called Simony (after the Simon of this passage). Simony is the buying/selling of church offices/roles or preferment for money.

Again, it is interesting to note that the Holy Spirit being received was somehow/someway observable. Simon saw something transpire that caused him to want a similar ability. Luke leaves this open to our imagination as to what was seen/observed/experienced.

Peter discerned immediately how seriously inappropriate Simon's request was and responded quickly and harshly. Simon, it appears, took Peter's warning seriously and soberly. Unfortunately, we don't know the rest of the story. Did Simon repent? Luke doesn't tell us. It appears that Luke is far more interested in the Gospel story than the story of any one particular person, as he ends this section with Peter and John "*preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.*" (8:25) There are some speculative, unverifiable stories/legends that this Simon became the founder of a form of Gnosticism that bore his name and an enemy of the apostles and the Church. But, again, this is not verifiable. Like Luke, our energy is better spent focusing on the advance of the Gospel instead of on any intriguing characters we meet along the way.

The action shifts quickly back to Philip. Luke, rather matter of factly, mentions that Philip was instructed by an angel to take a walk down a road (8:26). Apparently Philip had a "divine appointment" to get to. I can't help but wonder if this encounter that Philip had with the Ethiopian eunuch is a glimpse into God answering prayer. Here's how I imagine it...

The Ethiopian was in Jerusalem worshiping...that's clear from 8:27. I suspect that while worshiping he prayed something along the lines of, "*God, I really want to know and understand you better; to live more fully into the life you have for me. Please help me grow.*"

Then he's on his way home and sees a guy on the side of the road, actually running next to him, asking about what he was reading. All the while having no clue that an angel and the Holy Spirit had been orchestrating this encounter between the Ethiopian and Philip all along in answering the Ethiopian's prayer. Am I reading this into the text? Yes, obviously...but it's not outside the realm of possibility and actually rather consistent with the way God seems to work.

We know the Spirit was actively engaged with Philip, and Philip responded accordingly. I think it's safe to assume, since the Ethiopian was a worshiper of God and was actively reading the Scriptures, that the Spirit was active in his life, stirring up questions and curiosity. And in God's good, beautiful, and mysterious way He makes a connection between these two.

It is important to see how God likes to use humans instrumentally in each other's lives. God has an army of angels at His disposal, but the transmission of the Gospel message is done human to human. The Spirit is actively involved in the exchange, working in the life of both the giver and the receiver of the message. And God, at His own prerogative, may use angels to nudge things along a bit...but the work of evangelization is a distinct/unique part of our inheritance as Christ followers.

Just in case some readers don't know what a eunuch is, a eunuch is a male who has been castrated. Oftentimes, as was likely the case with our Ethiopian friend in this chapter, the castration was so that a man could work in the royal court and attend to or work with women (with no concern of any funny business going on). Also, just FYI, Candace is a title (Ethiopian queen), not a name, much like Pharaoh is a title (Egyptian king), not a name.

You'll recall from our study of the Gospel of Luke that Luke is always intent on demonstrating how the Gospel breaks down social barriers. The conversation between Philip and the Ethiopian, and the resulting acceptance of Christ by the Ethiopian (as his baptism attests), is such an occasion. Eunuchs, in the Old Testament, were excluded from the assembly (see Deuteronomy 23:1). But, the prophet Isaiah foretold of a time when eunuchs (and others who were often marginalized) who worshiped God and observed His laws would be accepted (Isaiah 56). It seems that Luke was cueing readers in to the fact that the time Isaiah had foretold had come to fruition in Jesus. (Keep in mind that the Ethiopian was reading from Isaiah.)

Philip was able to use the passage the Ethiopian was reading and the question he asked to tell him about Jesus. It is interesting that the Ethiopian's immediate reaction was the desire to be baptized...to pledge his allegiance to King Jesus. Reinforcing earlier discussions regarding baptism, this episode with the Ethiopian can also inform our imaginations regarding the role and purpose of baptism.

As we wrap up chapter 8, this will be the last we see of Philip for a while (he re-enters the story in chapter 21), but, man, what an exit/departure! Now you see him, now you don't. It seems like God is just showing off now—a tip of the hat to our earlier conversation on signs/wonders. I wonder what that experience was like for Philip.

Possible Discussion Questions

- What has following Jesus cost you? (This is a question that could be asked at numerous junctures throughout Acts.)
- In this week's passage we see something negative, like persecution, end up having a positive effect...the spreading of the Gospel. How/when have you seen something negative have a positive effect due to God's involvement?
- Though the passage doesn't mention anything about it, as believers spread throughout Judea and Samaria, we have to imagine that the people already in those places (towns, villages, cities) where these refugees landed had some thoughts and feelings about these new arrivals. Did they welcome them or were they hostile towards them? Were they warmly received or looked at with suspicion. Our understanding of humans would likely lead us to believe that it was a mixed response. This invites us to ask the question of how we, ourselves, respond to immigrants and refugees. (For an eye opening—as well as heart-breaking and gut-wrenching—experience, Google “global refugee crisis”.) What do you think a Christian response to this could be? (Please note that I did not say an “American response”. Those are two different things.)
- Have you seen/experienced miraculous signs/wonders? Why do you think we don't see/experience them much? (Or, is that even an expectation you have or don't have?)
- How do you know, or what gives you confidence, that the Holy Spirit dwells in you?

- Do you think the delay of the Holy Spirit being given to the Samaritans was more of a lesson for the Samaritans or for the apostles? Explain.
- Simon (the magician/sorcerer) seemed to want to mix his old way of life with new life in Christ. Sadly, that happens all too often...I suspect many of us, in our own way, try to do the same (bring established habits and ways of thinking/acting into our life with Christ...as if they can peacefully coexist). In reality, everything about us needs to be examined in light of Christ and His Kingdom. (We call this repentance.) We have the Holy Spirit, Scripture, and each other to help in that continual examination/repentance process. When you came to Christ, or as you've grown in Christ, what had to be let go so that you could embrace what Christ desires for you? (If you're willing, also share about how you came to the realization that something needed to change or be let go of.)
- The unity of the Church is of utmost importance. Unity bears witness to Jesus as the One who brings all humankind together. So when the Church is divided it really damages our witness/testimony, and makes a mockery of the Gospel. In this passage we see the lengths taken to ensure that there wouldn't be a divided Church—a Jewish Church and a Samaritan Church. Describe some of the ways in which the Church is divided today. What can we do to preserve the unity of the Church?
- What do you think about Peter's response to Simon?
- Philip was ready, willing, and able to share the Gospel wherever he was asked to go or wherever, with whomever, he found himself. How comfortable and confident are you in sharing the Gospel? What would help you feel more comfortable and confident?
- We've talked a lot about how Luke likes to highlight how the Gospel breaks down social barriers and invites all people into the Kingdom...we see it in this passage with the Gospel reaching Samaritans and an Ethiopian eunuch. What social barriers have you seen the Gospel break down? What social barriers still need to be overcome by the Gospel (or, more accurately, by Gospel-bearing people...i.e. the Church)?
- Led by the Spirit, Philip crossed social, cultural, and religious barriers to engage/interact with the Ethiopian eunuch. Is there anyone different than you that the Spirit might be leading you to get to know, understand, appreciate, and enjoy?

Soul Training Exercise ~ Unplugging

This week you are invited to unplug. Unplug from what you ask? To the degree that it is possible, no screens (TV, computer, phone, video games, etc.), no news or social media, and nothing with advertisements. (I realize you may have to use a screen/computer for work, so again, to the degree that is possible, at least give this a go during your off time.)

Instead, spend time reading, or walking, or talking, or resting, or playing a board game or cards, or engaging in a favorite hobby. Just give your brain a break from incessant input. Allow yourself to be more fully present to God and to others.

This could be a very eye-opening experience if/when we experience the compulsion to reach for our phone every time there's a moment of downtime. Do we really want to be that attached (addicted?) to our phones? Isn't there something better we could do with our time and attention?

Questions to consider as you go a week unplugged...

- How is our use of technology affecting our relationships?
- What are we actually trying to accomplish or actually desiring when we reach for our device?
- What do you experience or notice/learn about yourself as you go through this "digital detox"?