

KINGDOM AND CHURCH (3): ACTS 8



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A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Introduction to Acts 8

Acts 8 shows that the Kingdom of God is for real. Violence can neither contain nor stop it. Social, religious, and cultural barriers can't keep it from flowing through. Distance is no problem, either. The ongoing work of Christ is precisely that: His Spirit advancing His Kingdom unto His praise and glory.

A pattern emerges now which we can find throughout the course of Church history. Christ *prepares* people for His Kingdom. Then He *establishes* His Kingdom within communities of believers in local churches. From there the Kingdom is *dispersed* to other locales, where the pattern then begins to be *replicated*.

It pleases the Lord to use us, His people, in this amazing and glorious ongoing work. Who would not want to have as big a part as possible in this exciting enterprise?

We're happy to offer a series of brief videos to introduce each portion of this study. You can view each one *by [clicking here](#)*.

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We hope you find this study of Acts instructive and helpful to equip you for your walk with and work for the Lord. Thank you for joining us.

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1 Persecution

Be sure to view the video introducing our study of Acts 8 (Lesson 7) by [clicking here](#).

Read and meditate on Acts 8.1-3.

Things suddenly become ugly and unsafe. The dike holding back a sea of rage has burst, and a flood of persecution begins to inundate the Church in Jerusalem. And at the center of the violence is Saul of Tarsus.

For reflection

1. Luke mentions Saul here both for historical accuracy and to foreshadow events to come. This same one who now rages so violently will see his powers directed in a totally different direction in just a short while. Why do some people become so outraged at the sharing of the Gospel?
2. Jesus promised His followers that they would experience persecution (Jn. 15.18-20), but it's not likely the believers were prepared for what they began to experience here. We have seen the pent-up anger of the religious leaders of Jerusalem building from chapter 4 through chapters 5 and 7. Threats and warnings heat up to beating, and beating boils over to outright murder. Having gone that far, those opposed to the faith of Christ feel no qualms about unleashing a broad-based, violent assault against the believing community. Does such persecution of believers continue in our day? Is it possible such could happen in our nation?
3. This is the same Christian community whose witness had won many to Christ, and whose manifest love for one another and their neighbors had convinced a great company of the priests to believe. No matter. All it takes is one incident to unleash the forces of persecution. The Church needs to be ready at all times. What should a church do to prepare its members for persecution?
4. The fledgling Christian movement is forced out of the nest, and a new stage in the ongoing work of Christ begins. *Launched* in chapters 1 and 2, and *established* in chapters 3-7, that work of replacing the kingdom of darkness and the Lie with the Kingdom of Light and Truth now begins to *disperse* outward from Jerusalem toward the uttermost parts of the earth, where it will begin to be *replicated*. Just as the Lord planned, but hardly the way the Church expected. Does this suggest a pattern for local churches? For you as a believer? Explain.
5. Would you describe your church as contributing to the dispersal of the ongoing work of Christ in your community? In what ways?

Summary

The time had come for the Kingdom to break out of its confines in Jerusalem. God has many ways of moving us forward in His Acts 1.8 vision of the ongoing work of Christ. We need to be ready and willing to follow as He leads, however He chooses to lead us. How do you know when the Lord is leading you to bear witness to Him?

Closing Prayer

Have all the workers of iniquity no knowledge,
Who eat up my people *as* they eat bread,
And do not call on the LORD?
There they are in great fear,
For God *is* with the generation of the righteous.
You shame the counsel of the poor,
But the LORD *is* his refuge.
Oh, that the salvation of Israel *would come* out of Zion!

When the LORD brings back the captivity of His people,
Let Jacob rejoice *and* Israel be glad.

Psalm 14.4-7

2 “Gossiping the Gospel”

Be sure to view the video introducing our study of Acts 8 (Lesson 7) by [clicking here](#).

Read and meditate on Acts 8.4-8.

Only the apostles, and probably a small contingent, remained in Jerusalem (v. 1). The religious leaders probably allowed the apostles to remain free so they could observe the wholesale imprisoning of their flocks. Maybe *that* would finally shut them up?

For reflection

1. The people “were all scattered” in all directions. Were they chased out of Jerusalem, or did they simply flee before they could be arrested? (The verb could just as easily be translated “scattered themselves”.) But how can you from verse 4 that, though perhaps frightened, these believers were not cowed? What’s the difference?
2. If the religious leaders in Jerusalem hoped their problem had at last been solved, they were in for a rude awakening. Michael Green (*Evangelism and the Early Church*) says these dispersed believers went everywhere “gossiping the Gospel.” What would “gossiping the Gospel” look like in your life, if it were to become a feature of your relationships?
3. These believers had Jesus on the brain and in the heart. “Why are you fleeing?” “Because we love Jesus!” “Who’s Jesus? I thought He was dead?” “Well, let me explain...” And so forth. They talked about Him as they were going here and there, just as He had commissioned them to do (Matt. 28.18-20). How can we learn to become more *conversational* in our witness for Christ?
4. Throwing aside all ancient prejudices, Philip, following the example of Jesus (Jn. 4), went among the Samaritans to proclaim the Good News. Were there people in Samaria who had remembered Jesus’ visit, not that long ago? Perhaps. At any rate, the harvest was substantial, both because of Philip’s preaching and because of the good works done in Jesus’ name. Good works and good words go together in carrying out the ongoing work of Christ. The result? Joy all around! Don’t you wonder how the news of this played in the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem? How does the Gospel help us to overcome fear, prejudice, and lack of experience so that we can fulfill our calling as ambassadors of the Kingdom?
5. Threaten them, beat them, throw them into jail, take away their freedom, kill them – the Lord Jesus knows how to use all such trials, and more, to strengthen His people and further His ongoing work. We need not fear the rage, threats, conniving, or schemes of unbelievers. It comes naturally to them in the face of the Gospel, just as gossiping the Gospel should come naturally to those who go everywhere as ambassadors of the risen Christ. But – why doesn’t it?

Summary

The believers in Jerusalem had experienced the Kingdom. They knew the reality of Jesus Christ alive and ruling over them and living in them. They’d seen the changes in their lives and those of their neighbors. They’d experienced the love and generosity of their neighbors. They had known the power of the Spirit to bear witness to Christ. Why should anything change, just because they had to move to some new place? In what ways do you experience the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom of God?

Closing Prayer

Deliver me, O my God, out of the hand of the wicked,
Out of the hand of the unrighteous and cruel man.
For You are my hope, O Lord GOD;

You are my trust from my youth.
By You I have been upheld from birth;
You are He who took me out of my mother's womb.
My praise *shall be* continually of You.
I have become as a wonder to many,
But You *are* my strong refuge.
Let my mouth be filled *with* Your praise
And with Your glory all the day.

Psalm 71.4-8

3 Amazing the Amazer

Be sure to view the video introducing our study of Acts 8 (Lesson 7) by [clicking here](#).

Read and meditate on Acts 8.9-13.

Simon's magic was probably pretty small stuff, more sleight of hand than occult arts, I suspect (although I wouldn't rule those out). The fact that he himself was amazed at what Philip was doing suggests that he hadn't done anything as grand as what Luke records in verse 7.

For reflection

1. Card tricks? Bogus fortune telling? Delphic double-speak? Did he have others working with him to pull the wool over the credulous Samaritans' eyes? We don't know. But Simon was pretty impressive, to say the least. What kinds of "magic tricks" tend to impress and amaze people in our day? Are people who cling to these impressive displays any less gullible and less than those who were amazed at Simon? Explain.
2. But even Simon was boggled and amazed by what he heard and saw in Philip. The *amazzer* was amazed, and he put his trust in the Lord, or so it seems. Does it seem to you that Simon was believing the *Word* of the Gospel in this response? Is it possible some people today have "put their trust" in Jesus for the wrong reasons? Explain.
3. In our day the scientific community occupies the pole position on signs and wonders. And folks everywhere are impressed, even though there are perfectly logical explanations for everything science does. No matter, science today is a close to God as most people think anything or anyone could be. But science cannot match or reproduce the mighty acts of God – creation, providence, redemption, conversion, sanctification, the mission of the Church. No wonder so many practicing scientists are committed followers of Jesus Christ. Should Christians today simply sit by in silence while the wild claims of atheistic scientists dazzle the duped? Explain.
4. "Signs and wonders" don't always have to be of a "supernatural" sort. The love which shone out from the Christian community in Acts 6 was a *sign* that created *wonder* and conversion to Christ on the part of many. Science, while impressive, can be a little ho-hum after a while. The glory of God, reflected in creation and refracted through the transformed lives of His people, on the other hand, never ceases to impress. How might you use some aspect of the creation – some *sign* or *wonder* of God – to launch a conversation about spiritual matters?
5. What about your life? What is God "signing" in your life to cause others to "wonder" about the truth of the Gospel you proclaim?

Summary

Signs and wonders, of whatever sort, are not sufficient to bring about true conversion to Christ. For that we need the Word of the Gospel. Meditate on 1 Peter 3.15. Suppose some unbelieving friend, *wondering* about some Kingdom *sign* he observed in your life – let's say your consistent love, peace, and joy – were to ask you about this. What would you say?

Closing Prayer

Deliver me, O LORD, from my enemies;
In You I take shelter.
Teach me to do Your will,
For You *are* my God;

Your Spirit *is* good.
Lead me in the land of uprightness.
Revive me, O LORD, for Your name's sake!
For Your righteousness' sake bring my soul out of trouble.

Psalm 143.9-11

4 Not for Sale

Be sure to view the video introducing our study of Acts 8 (Lesson 7) by [clicking here](#).

Read and meditate on Acts 8.14-24.

In Simon's world, his *former* world, that is, his request was probably quite natural. Doubtless some had come to him in the past wanting to apprentice to him, so they could learn the "tricks" of the trade as well. But he was so blind to the sin of his request that he couldn't see how totally off-base and out of line it was.

For reflection

1. I'm inclined to chalk-up Simon's question as an honest mistake on the part of one who didn't really understand what he was getting into when he "believed" in Jesus. Why did Peter need to rebuke him so sharply?
2. The apostles had come down to Samaria from Jerusalem in order, it seems, to verify and validate the work of the Philip and the others. The Lord withheld the outpouring of the Spirit until their arrival because He wanted there to be no doubt in anyone's mind that this new stage in the ongoing work of Christ, beyond Israel to the Samaritans, was as valid as what had been happening in Jerusalem. The advance of the Kingdom is *always* the work of the Spirit; but it isn't *always* accompanied by the same signs and wonders. Explain.
3. Simon didn't quite understand what was going on, but he learned quickly enough that this was a new order, a new kind of experience and Kingdom, and the power of God could not be bought and sold. This is because it is *real* spiritual power, bestowed not bought, and not just the hocus-pocus employed for impressing men and making a fast buck. How should we expect God to *sign* His Kingdom power through our lives each day?
4. Simon's response to Peter suggests to me that he was truly contrite. We use the word, "simony", to refer to any purchased office or position of authority. I think that's too bad. Let's give Simon a break, shall we? Simon asked for prayers. How should we pray for the unbelievers in our lives?
5. Now in the dispersal stage, the Gospel penetrates the Samaritan nation – a prelude to chapter 10 and the bringing of the Good News to the Gentiles (which is itself a prelude to chapters 13-28). The Lord's plan continues to unfold according to His promise, and all this is merely the portent of more amazing things to come. How can you see in this chapter (look ahead to the end) a kind of *reprise* of Jesus' promise in Acts 1.8? Why would this be important to recall at just this stage of the history of the ongoing work of Christ?

Summary

Repentance and faith – these are the way into the Kingdom of God. Any other way, whether by impressing others, cajoling or "guilt-tripping" them, or even bribing them by some means, is not the Lord's way. Do we ever stoop to ways other than repentance and faith to encourage people to "believe" in Jesus? Explain.

Closing Prayer

For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give *it*;
You do not delight in burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God *are* a broken spirit,
A broken and a contrite heart—
These, O God, You will not despise.

Psalms 51.16, 17

5 The Gospel to the Samaritans (Again)

Be sure to view the video introducing our study of Acts 8 (Lesson 7) by [clicking here](#).

Read and meditate on Acts 8.25.

This verse offers little but suggests much. The apostles stuck around in Samaria to testify and speak the Word of the Lord, making this the second incursion of the Gospel to that region. The first was made by Jesus Himself, and now, just as He promised, they were reaping more of the fruit of what He had sown.

For reflection

1. What “word,” we wonder, were the apostles preaching? Doubtless, that which had launched the ongoing work of Christ in Jerusalem. They must have spoken to the people about the Kingdom, and taught them to pray and prepare for its coming, to care for one another as a new community within the existing community of the Samaritans, and to proclaim the Kingdom to their neighbors. This, after all, is what we saw in Jerusalem. Is this what you see in your church? Explain.
2. The apostles must have stayed there long enough to be persuaded that the work *launched* by Philip and others was becoming sufficiently well *established* to ensure that it would continue after them. Then, as they returned to Jerusalem, they continued preaching in villages and towns, leading many more to the Lord and, doubtless, helping them become established as well. The pattern we observed in Acts 1-6 must have served as a kind of template for the apostles as they oversaw the progress of Christ’s ongoing work into new areas. How does the work of making disciples fit into that template (Matt. 28.18-20)?
3. Luke doesn’t bother to repeat the details, but we can assume, I think, that he has written the book of Acts to report on the ongoing work of Christ, so that it can continue generation after generation, following the same pattern of launch/establish/disperse/replicate that he describes, even unto and beyond our own day. Should local churches today be guided by this pattern? Explain.
4. We should be reading Acts in order to discover as much as possible about the Lord’s preferred way of advancing His ongoing work. We’re looking for patterns, norms, protocols, and even structures and components which, because they were used so powerfully in Acts, must still be of value today. How would you describe that “pattern” as we’ve been observing it thus far?
5. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 equals “really well”, how would you assess the life and ministry of your own church according to the pattern Luke presents in Acts? What’s one thing your church could do to improve your assessment?

Summary

Recall Jesus’ witness to the Samaritans in John 4. Jews and Samaritans had no dealings with one another. They didn’t like or trust one another. In many ways, for the believers in Jerusalem to take the ongoing work of Christ into Samaria was “swallowing the big frog” right from the start (“If you have to swallow a frog, don’t spend too much time looking at it; if you have to swallow a lot of frogs, start with the big one”). What would be the “big frog” for your church as a witness to the ongoing work of Christ? Is God big enough to help you in this?

Closing Prayer

The LORD my God will enlighten my darkness.
For by You I can run against a troop,
By my God I can leap over a wall.

As for God, His way *is* perfect;
The word of the LORD is proven;
He *is* a shield to all who trust in Him.
For who *is* God, except the LORD?
And who *is* a rock, except our God?
It is God who arms me with strength,
And makes my way perfect.
He makes my feet like the *feet of* deer,
And sets me on my high places.

Psalm 18.28-33

6 Things to Come

Be sure to view the video introducing our study of Acts 8 (Lesson 7) by [clicking here](#).

Read and meditate on Acts 8.26-34.

This Ethiopian was either a Jew or, more likely, a “God-fearer” – a Gentile who had either converted to Judaism or was friendly to it. We’ll see another one of these in Acts 10. He had been worshipping in Jerusalem, and possessed a chariot and a scroll of the book of Isaiah. He was a man of some means, obviously, since he served in the court of the Ethiopian queen. Man, how “uttermost parts” can you get?

For reflection

1. The Lord sent Philip on this mission because he had proven himself faithful and effective, both in Jerusalem and Samaria. Looking at your own faithfulness to your Kingdom-and-glory calling (1 Thess. 2.12), what ways are you expecting the Lord to increase His Kingdom mission in and through your life?
2. It’s not clear just *how* the Lord spoke to Philip, but *that* He did, in some sense, is what Luke intends us to know. Philip may well have heard audible voices, as Luke records; or he may have simply had strong impressions. Either way, he understood what God wanted, and he did not hesitate to carry out his assignment. (As an aside, we note here also the work of an angel in furthering the ongoing work of Christ and the Gospel, cf. Acts 5.19-21; Acts 12.7-11; Rev. 14.6, 7.) How do you expect God to speak to you about your mission in His Kingdom? Or to empower you for it? Explain.
3. Philip finds the man reading in the scroll of Isaiah, perhaps reviewing something he’d heard while in Jerusalem. He could not have been focused on a more propitious text. Note Philip’s courtesy: he asks a question about the man’s reading, then waits to be invited up into the chariot with him. The eunuch explains that he needs a guide, and Philip is the man for the job. Is there any guidance here for us, as we take up the work of proclaiming the Kingdom in our [Personal Mission Fields](#)?
4. The Word of God is living and powerful. It was already at work in this man’s heart, for, even as the Spirit was summoning and sending Philip, He was wooing and striving with (Gen. 6.3) this Ethiopian. There is something to be said for reading the Scriptures with unbelievers, or for encouraging them to read the Bible for themselves. How might this become part of your witness for the Lord?
5. Luke is once again using this vignette to remind us of Acts 1.8 and to prepare us for the Gospel’s coming to the Gentile world. Just as Philip was the right man to take the Gospel to the Samaritans, so he would be instrumental in getting it into the Gentile world of Ethiopia. Makes sense, and sets us up for Peter’s encounter with Cornelius in chapter 10. Luke is encouraging a pattern of thinking and living for his readers. How would you describe that pattern?

Summary

Jesus uses those who are faithful, giving them opportunities, resources, and power to do His ongoing work. Phillip, like Steven, is another example of the kind of men and women we meet throughout Church history who, because they are faithful in a few things, are given greater opportunities and more power to do greater works for the Lord. Do you know people like this? Should you aspire to be such a person yourself?

Closing Prayer

The LORD *is* merciful and gracious,
Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy.
He will not always strive *with us*,

Nor will He keep *His anger* forever.
He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor punished us according to our iniquities.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him;
As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.
As a father pities *his* children,
So the LORD pities those who fear Him.
For He knows our frame;
He remembers that we *are* dust.
As for man, his days *are* like grass;
As a flower of the field, so he flourishes.
For the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
And its place remembers it no more.
But the mercy of the LORD *is* from everlasting to everlasting
On those who fear Him,
And His righteousness to children's children,
To such as keep His covenant,
And to those who remember His commandments to do them.

Psalm 103.8-18

7 On His Way Rejoicing

Be sure to view the video introducing our study of Acts 8 (Lesson 7) by [clicking here](#).

Read and meditate on Acts 8.35-40.

We note that baptism must have been intimately connected with believing in Jesus, because the eunuch was eager for it at the earliest opportunity. Not that baptism saves, but we are commanded to baptize – and, by implication, to be baptized – as a first act of obedience to the Lord (Matt. 28.18-20). First acts of obedience are more likely to lead to next steps of obedience.

For reflection

1. Philip's work done, the Lord "carried" him away to Azotus and beyond for whatever He had next in mind. The eunuch continued south to his native land, a new person, filled with joy. He would obviously have many opportunities to explain what was different in his life. Put yourself in his shoes for a moment: How would he have explained what he learned in Jerusalem and Gaza?
2. Luke leaves the eunuch's homecoming to our imaginations. We can believe that what happened in the home of Cornelius (Acts 10) happened in the home of that Ethiopian as well. Like Jesus in Samaria, this eunuch may have helped pave the way for the Gospel in Africa. Luke can't tell us everything, but he can point to it, and he does. In what ways might God use you to pave the way for the Gospel in the lives of the people you see each week?
3. Luke wants us to understand that the power of God is at large in the world, that Christ is pursuing His ongoing work, and that no place is off limits, no person is beyond reach, and no power on earth can resist the power of God's Spirit as He carries out the ongoing work of Christ. He is telling a true and thrilling story, brilliantly. Does your church see itself as part of this story? In what specific ways?
4. How can you see that Acts 8 is a kind of reprise and reminder of Jesus' promise in Acts 1.8? How would you describe the work of the Spirit and the work of Jesus' followers in extending the ongoing work of the Lord throughout Acts 1-8?
5. Launch, establishment, dispersal, replication: Here is a pattern of the ongoing work of Christ with respect to His Kingdom and the communities that are its signs and outposts. Where does your church need to improve its "fit" with this pattern?

Summary

The Gospel goes on, not because of the clever programs, charismatic people, or the plentiful budgets and exertions of the Christians, but because of the power of God in His Spirit. Just as Jesus had promised in Acts 1.8, the Kingdom, in spite of violent opposition, huge cultural barriers, and great distances, is overflowing and flowing right on cue and precisely as the Lord had planned. Pray for your church, that it might become more consciously and actively involved with the ongoing work of Christ.

Closing Prayer

*There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God,
The holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High.
God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved;
God shall help her, just at the break of dawn.
The nations raged, the kingdoms were moved;
He uttered His voice, the earth melted.*

The LORD of hosts *is* with us;
The God of Jacob *is* our refuge. *Selah*
Come, behold the works of the LORD,
Who has made desolations in the earth.
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two;
He burns the chariot in the fire.
Be still, and know that I *am* God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!
The LORD of hosts *is* with us;
The God of Jacob *is* our refuge.

Psalm 46.4-11

For reflection or discussion

1. Describe the pattern of the ongoing work of Christ as we see it emerging in Acts 1-8.
2. How would you explain the relationship between the disciples and the Holy Spirit in the flowing of this pattern?
3. Why is the Gospel powerful to expand even in the face of obstacles? What obstacles to the Gospel exist in your community?
4. How do words and deeds work together for the progress of the Kingdom? In your life? Through your church?
5. What's the most important insight or lesson you've learned from Acts 8?

We are transformed into the image of Jesus Christ *from* the glory we encounter in God's Word to the way we *live for His glory* in the world (2 Cor. 3.12-18; 1 Cor. 10.31). What have you encountered of God's glory in our reading and meditations in Acts 8? How has He shown Himself to you more clearly? How can this help you live more consistently for His glory in the daily details of your life? What have you learned about yourself from Acts 8 to help you in being a witness for the Lord?

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Thank you.