

In the Wake of Stephen's Death

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The video version is available at" <https://youtu.be/pSZf5rMHKiw>

The scripture reading is Acts 8:1-40

The conviction and death of Stephen signaled a major change in the community of Yeshua's followers. Up until this time, they had freely and openly worshiped daily at the temple and were highly regarded among the people. However, the lies spread by the false witnesses from the Hellenist Jews of the Synagogue of the Freedmen caused ripples of unease and mistrust to spread throughout Jerusalem especially in the community of the Hellenist Jews. The Sanhedrin, which had been reluctant to act openly against the believers because they had the regard of the people, changed their policies. They not only admonished believers not to teach in Yeshua's name, they arrested, imprisoned and killed many of the believers. The historian Hippolytus of Rome records that the deacon Nicanor was killed in the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed.

How would this persecution impact the believers? Would they remain faithful now that they faced real opposition? What does this tell us today when we face opposition or hatred?

The disciples who had come up to Jerusalem some five years earlier and witnessed or experienced the Holy Spirit filling the disciples had stayed in Jerusalem all this time. Now, many of them were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

Acts 8:1 NKJV 1 Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

Luke will later record that the believers spread as far as Damascus and Antioch. Some probably returned to their home towns. Others probably sought refuge in the Greek cities of the Decapolis.

The apostles, however, weren't among those who fled Jerusalem. Since this persecution arose out of the Hellenist community, most of those who fled were from this community. In this chapter, Luke focuses on two Hellenist Jews; Saul of Tarsus who was a zealous persecutor of the followers of Yeshua, and Philip who was another one of the seven deacons.

Saul of Tarsus was probably one of the members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen. He was known to the men who bore false witness against Stephen. When these men put aside their outer garments to stone Stephen, they entrusted their garments to Saul. This chapter opens by stating that Saul agreed with the death sentence of Stephen.

Even as the members of the Sanhedrin are seeing to the burial and mourning of Stephen, Saul takes a more active role.

Acts 8:2-3 NKJV 2 And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.
3 As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.

As Saul is hunting down members of the assembly of Yeshua's followers, those who had fled Jerusalem shared the good news that Yeshua, whom many of them had seen during His years of ministry, was indeed the

Messiah they had been waiting for. Luke turns from the account of Saul to follow the journey of Philip as he went down to the city of Samaria.

Acts 8:4-5 NKJV 4 Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. 5 Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them.

Philip wasn't hiding away from persecution; he and others like him were carrying out the instructions that Messiah had given his followers as He ascended into heaven from the Mount of Olives.

Acts 1:8 NKJV 8 "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Yeshua had visited some of the villages of Samaria during His ministry. In one village, Yeshua met a woman at a well who invited everyone in her village to come and hear Yeshua. The Samaritans received the words of Yeshua with enthusiasm accepting that He was the awaited Messiah.

John 4:42 NKJV 42 Then they said to the woman, "Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world."

Philip was following up on the visit by Yeshua. Many Samaritans probably remembered the visit by Yeshua. They were ready to hear Philip's words.

Acts 8:6-8 NKJV 6 And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. 7 For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. 8 And there was great joy in that city.

The multitudes received Philip's words with one accord. The Greek word translated as multitudes is "Ochlos," number 3793 in Strong's concordance meaning a throng from a word meaning a vehicle. The phrase "one accord" is from the Greek word "homothumadon," number 3661 from two Greek words, "homou" and "thumos" meaning "together with passion." The message of the Messiah swept through Samaria as a wave or throng catching up all the people as it passed. Together with passion they heard and accepted!

One of the Samaritans caught up in this wave was a well-known sorcerer named Simon. In today's world, Simon would have been a practitioner of witchcraft, Tarot reading or New Age practices. Simon saw the miracles and signs that Philip did among his people and he enthusiastically embraced the gospel. He was baptized and accompanied Philip as he traveled through Samaria to spread the gospel.

Acts 8:12-13 NKJV 12 But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. 13 Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.

The Samaritans were a group of people who were descended from the mingling of the Israelites left in Israel after the Assyrian captivity and the foreigners brought in to replace the Israelites. They practiced a mixture of Judaism and worship of other gods. They only accepted the words of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, as the word of God. The histories and prophets were all rejected. At the time of the captivity by Babylon, they claimed they were separate from the Jewish people and at the return of the Jewish people from Babylon, the Samaritans opposed them. There were centuries of antagonism between the Samaritans and the Jews. However, Yeshua had visited them and shown His disciples that they, also, would receive the gospel.

Word of the gospel spreading through Samaria reached the apostles in Jerusalem. They sent out Peter and John to check out the situation.

Acts 8:14-17 NKJV 14 Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, 15 who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. 16 For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

It's interesting that the Holy Spirit did not immediately come on them when they were baptized. This new group of believers received the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as a group. First Fruits of Zion in Chronicles of the Apostles explains the three distinct outpourings of the Spirit described by Luke:

"The outpouring of the Holy Spirit, manifest with signs and wonders, proved of each group's full participation in the new covenant of Messiah. The pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon 1) Jews, 2) Samaritans, and 3) Gentiles represents three concentric spheres of outreach."ⁱ

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was the sign that a group of people were full members of the body of believers. When Peter is later questioned about the Gentile Cornelius' acceptance, Peter testifies to his fellow apostles that the gift of the Holy Spirit is the sign that the Gentiles are also accepted by God.

Acts 11:17-18 NKJV 17 "If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" 18 When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life."

Imagine the sight in Samaria of thousands of people receiving the Holy Spirit at the same time. They would have been prophesying and praising God as a group like the disciples at Shavuot and, later, like Cornelius' household. Simon was amazed at the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. I wonder if he received the Holy Spirit or was just an observer. Luke tells us that Simon immediately wanted to buy the secret of how to give anyone the Holy Spirit. Peter rebukes Simon.

Acts 8:21-23 NKJV 21 "You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. 22 "Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. 23 "For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity."

Although Simon received the gospel with enthusiasm and was baptized, his heart was not right with God. He remained poisoned with bitterness and bound by his sin. Receiving the gospel message is more than an outward profession and baptism. It must be accompanied by a change in heart. Yeshua spoke about four different types of people who would hear the gospel in a parable about seed falling on four different types of soil. These types of soil represented four different types of people one of which was just like Simon.

Luke 8:14 NKJV 14 "Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity.

Simon's faith was choked out by his greed and bondage to sin. He professes repentance for seeking to buy the secret of imparting the Holy Spirit on others.

Acts 8:24 NKJV 24 Then Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me."

This repentance may or may not have been genuine. Simon doesn't pray for himself; instead he pleads for Peter to pray on his behalf. The [NKJV Study Bible](#) comments on Simon's faith:

"Some people believe Peter's words in verse 21 indicate that Simon's confession and baptism were not genuine. Church history later associates Simon with heresy and identifies him as an enemy of the Christian faith."ⁱⁱ

After observing that the Samaritans were, like the Jews, accepted by God into the kingdom, Peter and John head back to Jerusalem. On the way, they continued to preach the gospel.

Acts 8:25 NKJV 25 So when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans.

Now that the message has been brought and received in Samaria, Philip is sent on another journey.

Acts 8:26 NKJV 26 Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is desert.

Philip went south back towards Jerusalem and then over to the southern coast where God had a divine appointment set up for him! An Ethiopian official had been in Jerusalem to worship at the temple and was now on his way home. Gaza was the city from which people traveling to and through Egypt equipped themselves for the journey across the Sinai.

Acts 8:27-28 NKJV 27 So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, 28 was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet.

The nation of Ethiopia had a strong population of Jews. Most traditions from within the community place the founding at around the time of Solomon or his son Rehoboam from exiles from the tribe of Dan. A few sources place the forming of the community later during the time of the Babylonian captivity. The Ethiopian that Philip encountered was almost certainly a Jewish man from this community of Jews. There was no issue raised about him being a Gentile, so the assumption must be that he was an Ethiopian Jew.

Philip ran up next the chariot, asked him about what he was reading, and offered to explain it to him.

Acts 8:29-31 NKJV 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go near and overtake this chariot." 30 So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him.

The Ethiopian was reading from the scroll of Isaiah, specifically the passage in chapter 53 about the suffering servant.

Acts 8:32-34 NKJV 32 The place in the Scripture which he read was this: "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth. 33 In His humiliation His justice was taken away, And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth." 34 So the eunuch answered Philip and said, "I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?"

We are, of course, reading this passage in the English, but Luke records it in Greek. The Greek of Luke's writing closely follows the Greek in the Septuagint translation of Isaiah. It makes sense that God would send a Jew

who understood the Greek and was familiar with the Greek Septuagint to answer the questions of the Ethiopian. We can only wonder if the Ethiopian encountered any of the followers of Yeshua while he was in Jerusalem.

The Ethiopian asks the question that is asked even today by the Jewish people, "Who is the passage referring to?" First Fruits of Zion in Chronicle of the Apostles explains this controversy:

"Christianity and Judaism have contended over the identity of Isaiah's "Servant of the LORD" since the first recorded debate between a Christian and a Jew: Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*. Christians identify the Suffering Servant as the Messiah; whereas many Jewish commentators identify the Suffering Servant as a personification for the entire nation of Israel... The oldest Jewish interpretations, however, see the passage as messianic."ⁱⁱⁱ

The eunuch wondered if Isaiah was referring to himself as this Suffering Servant. Philip began at this scripture to explain how Yeshua was the man Isaiah referred. Further, he explained that Yeshua was the looked for Messiah who had fulfilled this and other prophesies.

Acts 8:35-36 NKJV 35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him.

The road they were on cut across the desert from Jerusalem across the desert along what is even now called the "Gaza Road." Although the road was through desert territory, there were numerous springs along the route. As they approached one of these springs of water, the Eunuch declared his desire to be baptized.

Acts 8:3-38 NKJV 36 Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?" 37 Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." 38 So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.

Philip must have given the eunuch the same instructions that Peter gave his listeners on the day of Shavuot when the Holy Spirit first filled the disciples.

Acts 2:38-39 NKJV 38 Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 "For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

The Ethiopian followed this pattern of repentance and baptism into the promise of remission of sins! The Ethiopian Orthodox Church traces its beginnings to this encounter on the road.

The discussion between Philip and the Ethiopian follows the Talmud's model of hypothetical conversations between two or more rabbis. Typically, rabbis meet on a road and discuss various points of the scriptures. First Fruits of Zion in Chronicles of the Apostles explain:

"Jewish sources often frame a mystical discourse within a short travel narrative on the principle that when righteous men journey together, they busy themselves with expositions of the Torah."^{iv}

After the eunuch was baptized, Philip was caught away by the Spirit of the LORD.

Acts 8:39-40 NKJV 39 Now 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. 40 But Philip was found at Azotus. And passing through, he preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea.

The eunuch did not seem to be troubled by Philip's abrupt appearance or disappearance. He went on his way rejoicing! This encounter has remarkable parallels to Yeshua's conversation with two men on the road to Emmaus. Yeshua, like Philip, drew near and joined the travelers on their journey. He began the conversation with their own reflections about the events at Passover and explained to them how the scriptures all spoke of Him. After their eyes were opened to see Yeshua, Yeshua vanished from their sight! The disciples returned with rejoicing to Jerusalem sharing all that Yeshua had taught them.

The result of the persecution against the believers was the spread of the gospel message to the broader nation of Israel. The believers continued faithful as they spread the word while "on the road." The Torah commands us to speak of God's teachings when we walk on the road. Let us face persecution with faithfulness to God while never ceasing to speak of Him on our journey through life.

Study Questions:

1. How are these concentric rings of the spreading of the gospel reflected in Yeshua's instructions to the disciples to be His witnesses in Acts 1:8? Where do we see this pattern reflected elsewhere in the scriptures?
2. Compare the two Hellenists Philip and Saul in this chapter. What is Luke trying to show by setting up this contrast?
3. Why do you think that the Holy Spirit didn't fall on the Samaritans until Peter and John arrived to check out the report of the gospel being received by the Samaritans? Does this mean that salvation is a two-step process—belief and baptism followed by receiving the Holy Spirit in a separate step?
4. What is the significance of "speaking on the road" as instructed by the Sh'ma in Deuteronomy 6:6-7? How Yeshua's words in Matthew 28:18-20 reinforce this instruction? Where else do we have an "on the road" experience?
5. Simon believed the gospel message Philip presented and was baptized. What was missing? How do we need to beware of those things in our lives?
6. What new insight did you gain from this teaching? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?

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ⁱ D. Thomas Lancaster. The Chronicles of the Apostles. First Fruits of Zion. ©2016. Page 189.

ⁱⁱ NKJV Study Bible. Earl D. Radmacher, Th.D., General Editor. ©2007 Thomas Nelson, Inc. Page 1723.

ⁱⁱⁱ D. Thomas Lancaster. The Chronicles of the Apostles. First Fruits of Zion. ©2016. Page 196.

^{iv} D. Thomas Lancaster. The Chronicles of the Apostles. First Fruits of Zion. ©2016. Page 194.