



The following is the summary of the Sunday sermon that is sent to the body at Steadfast in an email called "The Weekly"

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## **Acts 8:4-9:31**

### **Acts: The Gospel in Judea and Samaria, Part 1**

After the stoning of Stephen, there was "a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem and they were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria." [Acts 8:1 ESV] This dispersion marked the beginning of the second major geographical and ethnic expansion of the church. One of those forced to flee was Philip, one of the seven chosen in Acts 6:5, who headed north to preach the Gospel in Samaria. [The Jews viewed Samaritans as half-breeds, descendants of Israelites who had intermarried with Gentiles and who worshiped God in a corrupt perversion of Judaism.]

#### **Philip in Samaria, 8:5-25**

Philip's ministry in Samaria denoted a remarkable expansion of the Gospel into potentially hostile territory. [Could the positive acceptance of the Gospel in Samaria be related to the conversion of the Samaritan woman in John 4?] This expansion led to an encounter with Simon Magnus, who was impressed with Philip's power and sought to buy access to this power. The work of the Spirit was not for sale, declared Peter, who was investigating the work among the Samaritans. Acts 8:13 says "Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip." [ESV] This declaration combined with Peter's rebuke of Simon in 8:20-24, begs the question: Was Simon sincerely a man of faith or was he merely seeking Philip's power? His response to Peter's admonition that he must pray seems dismissive—almost "You pray Peter; I will not."

#### **Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, 8:26-40**

A eunuch, the treasurer of the Queen of Ethiopia, was reading Isaiah 53:7-8 and did not understand what he was reading. Philip, guided by the Holy Spirit, led him to understand that the text was describing Jesus. Remarkably, the Ethiopian believed and was baptized. Who was this Ethiopian? More than likely, he was a Diaspora Jew or Gentile who was already tied to Judaism, as his coming to Jerusalem to worship and his reading of Isaiah demonstrated. [He is sometimes called a "God-fearer."] It is also interesting that the ancient world often regarded Ethiopia as "the end of the earth." That the Ethiopian trusted Christ illustrates the beginning of the fulfillment of Acts 1:8. The Gospel not only reaches the end of the earth, it also reaches the ethnic margins of society. The Gospel is for everyone!

#### **The Conversion and Early Ministry of Saul, 9:1-31**

Certainly one of the greatest conversions in the history of the church is Saul. [Saul was his Jewish name; Paul was his Roman name.] His conversion is detailed three times in Acts: In Acts 9; in his testimony before the Jewish mob in Jerusalem in Acts 22:3-11; and in his testimony before King Herod Agrippa II in Acts 26:2-18. What was especially significant was the zeal Saul manifested as a Pharisee in his devotion to God. Indeed, he even argued that his persecution of the church was done with a "good conscience" (Acts 23:1). He believed that the church was an evil religious force that needed to be

eliminated. But, his religious zeal had to be channeled towards the church, his perceived enemy. Only Jesus could do that!

In Acts 9:1-2, Saul had received extradition letters from the high priest in Jerusalem to stop the advance of the church in Damascus. He would bring the bound prisoners back to Jerusalem. But Jesus stopped him! The dialogue between Jesus and Saul focused on why Saul was persecuting Jesus: To persecute Jesus' followers was to persecute Him, evidencing the solidarity of Jesus with His followers and their suffering. Jesus then instructed Saul, now temporarily blind, to go into Damascus.

The church also needed preparation for this shocking turn of events. Thus, the Lord directed the nervous and protesting Ananias to receive Saul, one who had done so much evil to the church. Jesus declared that Saul was His chosen instrument to take the Gospel to the Gentiles, before kings and to Israel (9:15-16). Ananias obeyed, demonstrating how one should welcome an enemy who comes to faith. Saul regained his sight and was baptized (v. 18). Everything about Saul's conversion was of the Lord.

Amazingly, Saul began almost immediately to minister in Damascus, proclaiming that Jesus is the Christ (v. 22); but the Jewish leadership sought his death. He escaped from Damascus in a hamper basket to Jerusalem. There, with Barnabas, Saul "preached boldly in the name of Jesus" (v. 27). But the hostility towards Saul grew and he was sent to Tarsus.

Please read Acts 8 and 9 this week. As you do, reflect on these questions prayerfully, asking God to enable you to apply them to your life:

1. How does God use the persecution of His church? In His providence, does He bring good out of persecution? How does Acts 9 illustrate that truth?
2. Read John 4, where the Samaritan woman comes to faith in Jesus. She became a missionary to the Samaritans in her area. Did God use her to prepare the Samaritans for the ministry of Philip and Peter? Be amazed at God's sovereignty and providence as He accomplishes His work.
3. The Ethiopian eunuch did not understand what he was reading in Isaiah 53. Philip explained it to him. How important is the teaching and preaching of God's Word to you? Are you engaged in at least one in-depth study of God's Word? Are you helping others to understand what God's Word teaches?
4. The conversion of Saul is an amazing demonstration of God's grace. His transformation from a persecutor of Jesus' church to a champion of that church is only explained by God's supernatural power. Is God still doing this today? Does this truth energize you to become more involved in this "unstoppable revolution?"

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