

# Acts 8

Pastor Emeritus Joe Fuiten, Wednesday December 15, 2021

## Heavenly respect for Stephen

Acts chapter 7 ends with the death of Stephen. Before we proceed to chapter 8 I would like to pay attention to what Stephen saw as he was about to die. *55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." 57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep."*

What caught my interest is that Stephen saw Jesus standing whereas everywhere else Jesus is "seated at the right hand of the Father." For example Ephesians 1 19-2- says "...and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at the right hand in the heavenly places, far about all rule and authority and power and dominion, .." Hebrews 8:1 also has it "...We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven..."

Stephen was the first Christian martyr. As he lays down his life Jesus stands in heaven. We stand out of respect for an office or a position. I wonder if Jesus was not paying his respect to Stephen and all those who are martyred for the Gospel. He was the first but there are more, even today, who are giving their lives for their faith.

It is something to which only a few can aspire, to live or die in such a way that heaven itself rises to watch the glory of God revealed within the life of a human being.

**Persecution and the burial of Stephen.** *1 And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. 4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.*

It is not important to the text but the statement "Godly men buried Stephen" has shaped history and has been important in my ministry. Based on this account, Christianity has always considered it a righteous act to properly and respectfully handle the dead from the time of death through burial. It is why I worked to build the Chapel of the Resurrection, a beautiful building for purposes of burial, and also why I worked to start what I believe is the first funeral home in America operated by a church. As a University student traveling with a choir and band in Europe I saw old churches with their cemeteries in the churchyard and within the buildings themselves. That vision inspired me. As a seven-year-old my parents took our family to Disneyland. I liked that but I was even more impressed by the artwork and beauty of Forest Lawn and the incorporation of things like weddings on the same grounds where burial took place. I was moved by Jan Styka's painting of the crucifixion which had some influence on how the crucifixion is portrayed here in the chapel. This Scripture and those experiences have impacted my life to this day.

When Stephen was killed a line of blood had been crossed. Now the attacks against the fledgling church are called a “great persecution.” The church scattered. Ironically, the leaders stayed in Jerusalem. I am not sure why it happened in this way since it seems almost the opposite of what I would have expected. Fortunately, the people just didn’t run. They moved out preaching the Gospel wherever they went.

There is a lesson also in the crossing of a line. The unwarranted killing of Jesus crossed a line. Here another line is crossed like crossing the Rubicon. Once the first blood line had been crossed all subsequent lines became easier and easier. Such a line should never be allowed to be crossed. And if it is crossed it should have been met with immediate and severe consequences. Unless there is immediate consequence, then more will surely follow. The rioting, criminality, and lawlessness that was tolerated and allowed in the summer of 2020 crossed a blood line as well as a lawful line. By allowing it to go on, further crossings were inevitable. The “get tough” policies of Rudy Giuliani as Mayor of New York had a lot to do with the dramatic reduction in crime. He prosecuted even J-walking because one allowed crime will give rise to another and another. His approach made a difference. The failure to prosecute crime, allowing “minor” infractions, will only make things worse as we are presently seeing. Failure to enforce laws has been a crime in and of itself since the late 300’s when the Emperor Theodosius instituted a crackdown on magistrates who failed to enforce the law. We need that again. Without such efforts, lawlessness will spiral out of control and society will soon be overrun by evil.

**Philip went to Samaria.** *5 Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. 6 When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. 7 With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. 8 So there was great joy in that city. 9 Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, 10 and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is the divine power known as the Great Power." 11 They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. 12 But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. 13 Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.*

We do not know precisely to what city Philip went. Musa Abed thinks it was to his own hometown of Jifna. Maybe so. Across from the existing Orthodox Church of St. George there is the foundation of a very ancient church going back to as early as the 200’s. The people of Jifna look to Philip as the founder of their church. We do know for certain what Philip did. Verse 5 tells us he proclaimed Christ and (v6) did miraculous signs. As a result, the people paid close attention to Philip and believed Philip as he preached the good news. In response to their acceptance of Christ, they were baptized (v12). As new Christians they accepted the word of God (v14). This is quite clearly a revival of the first order.

One may wonder why evil spirits possessed so many people. In that day virtually every person worshipped a demon idol. The gods of Greece and Rome were not mythological. They were demons. In addition, many had ritual sex with prostitutes associated with the religion. The miracle is that not everyone was possessed.

Simon the “magician” apparently used the occult powers to captivate the people. He was impressed that Philip also had tremendous powers. He heard the message and accepted Christ as his Savior, although apparently not completely so.

Simon the magician has left a permanent mark on the history of the church. Besides the Bible, he has given his name to “simony”, the practice of buying and selling church offices. This practice was common in the Middle Ages. Peter’s strong denunciation of Simon indicates that he was responding to more than an innocent request. Neither Pastors nor other spiritual leaders are offended by honest questions. Simon, however, had a heart full of bitterness and was continuing to live in sin. Had he broken with his sin, there would have been no problem, even with an absurd question. Because of the sin, he is here condemned. Simon’s request at the end would seem to leave the matter hanging. According to church history, Simon became a great antagonist of the church and was influential in introducing elements of Gnostic Christianity.

**The Samaritans received the Holy Spirit subsequently to salvation.** *14 When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. 15 When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, 16 because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. 18 When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money 19 and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." 20 Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! 21 You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. 22 Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. 23 For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin." 24 Then Simon answered, "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me." 25 When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.*

For some, the troubling part of Luke’s account is that the believers received the Holy Spirit so long after salvation.

The Pentecostal explanation of the situation is that they received the Holy Spirit in salvation, but had not yet received the Baptism with the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, these early Christians believed that only the Baptism with the Holy Spirit completed the process and any partial experience was inadequate. They had not yet received the Holy Spirit, that is, completely and fully received the Holy Spirit.

Can we deny that these Samaritans were saved? They believed Philip as he preached the good news of God and Jesus Christ. They were baptized. Then Luke notes that they accepted the Word of God. They met the fundamental requirement for salvation: “*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.*”<sup>1</sup> Cyprian’s Council said yes, they were indeed saved. The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles also follows this line saying, “They embraced the faith of the God of the universe, and of the Lord Jesus, and were baptized into His name.”<sup>2</sup>

Catholic theology developed the idea of “confirmation” based, in part, on the dynamics of this account. They could not deny that the Samaritans were saved. But if the Catholic theologians accepted the Samaritans as saved, then they must explain away the phrase: “*Then Peter and John placed their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.*”

In Catholic theology, the Baptism with the Holy Spirit is received as part of the salvation-water baptism event. So Catholic theology, along with Anglicans and others who follow them, is caught on the horns of a dilemma. Was the Holy Spirit received in Salvation or when the

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 16:16.

<sup>2</sup> Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, Book VI, section VII. Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 7, p. 452.

Apostles laid their hands on them? Rather than accept the views of Cyril or take the Pentecostal view, the Catholics invented the notion of “confirmation.” In their view, the Holy Spirit was received earlier, when the Samaritans believed and were baptized. The Spirit was only “confirmed” in their lives when the proper authorities laid hands on them. They were comfortable in this view because their own practice often delayed baptism, and the imposition of hands, some time beyond when the catechumen entered the church’s influence. A contemporary Catholic theologian, Kellian McDonnell, in his book “Christian initiation and the baptism of the Holy Spirit,” has suggested that Catholics receive the Holy Spirit in baptism but need to pray for the “actualization” of it at a later time with signs that Pentecostals also acknowledge.

It is not clear to me when the church developed the idea of “confirmation”. Possibly it was with Hippolytus of Rome in the third century. What is quite clear is that Cyril, in the middle of the fourth century, is more in tune with a two-step process than he was with Baptism with the Holy Spirit occurring at salvation and a mere “confirmation” occurring later.

**Philip had a powerful encounter with an Ethiopian influencer.** *26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road-- the desert road-- that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." 27 So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. 29 The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." 30 Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. 31 "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. 33 In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." 34 The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" 35 Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. 36 As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" 38 And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. 40 Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.*

The Holy Spirit directs Philip to the government official from Ethiopia who is reading Isaiah.<sup>3</sup> The Ethiopian’s question opened the door for Philip to tell him about Jesus. Already the man was a seeker of God. In that case, it was not difficult for him to accept the message about Jesus. It is a case of those who seek God find him. I believe God takes responsibility for those who want to do right but do not know that Jesus is that right path. God will see to it that they hear the truth even if it is by dream or vision or the more ordinary preaching of salvation.

It is also apparent that part of Philip’s message about salvation included the necessity of baptism. So, having opened his heart to the Lord, he asked the next obvious question in verse

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<sup>3</sup> Isa 53:6-8 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. 7 He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken.

36, *"Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?"* Both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water. After baptism, he came back up out of the water only to have Philip suddenly spirited away by the Lord.

The language here is quite similar to the language of the baptism of Jesus followed by his anointing for ministry. Not surprisingly, some of the ancient copies also have the words "And, when they were come up out of the water, the Holy Spirit fell upon the eunuch."

Philip disappears only to reappear in Azotus, or Ashdod as we know it today. He preached in that area until he arrived in Caesarea where he probably met Mrs. Philip.