

The Power of Suffering

The stoning of Stephen was a turning point in the history of the early church. The events that followed Stephen's death rocked the new community of believers and set them on a new course. Out of the terrible carnage and suffering would emerge a stronger, more vibrant Christian church—one that would now understand more than ever its distinctive character. Leadership in the proclamation of the Gospel was being passed from the twelve apostles (who would remain in Jerusalem) to the Greek believers, such as Philip, who was one of the Seven.

Glance at the Chart to gain an overview of the "transition" period.

Bow in Prayer: "O Lord, make us willing to be pushed out beyond our comfort zone for the sake of the Gospel. When we are tempted to complain about uncomfortable circumstances, may we stop and consider what You might be preparing us for."

1. Recall what Jesus told His disciples before He was taken back into heaven (Matthew 24:9).

2. ***Read*** Acts 8:1-25 with this background in mind.
 - a. List the locations mentioned in the narrative. Locate the cities/territories on Map 1.

 - b. Record the name of each person in this fast paced sequence of events.

3. What adjective does Luke use to describe the persecution that breaks out against the Jerusalem church (Acts 8:1)?

4. What is quietly noted by Luke in Acts 8:2? Reverently reflect on this scene.

5. What do you know about Saul, the man who was trying to destroy the church? Consult a Bible dictionary if necessary.

6. What remarkable chain of events does Luke tell us about in verses 3 and 4?

We usually attribute the evangelization of that day to Paul's "preaching" rather than Saul's "persecution." Yet both are true. God used both his *obedience* and his *disobedience* to spread the Gospel.

7. What does this reveal about the ways of God?

The mantle of leadership now passes from Stephen to Philip (one of the Seven) who actually begins the Gentile mission of the church (Acts 8:5-6). Philip goes directly to the city of Samaria.

8. a. What do we learn about the relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans from John 4:9?

b. What does Luke 9:51-55 tell us about the attitude of the disciples towards the Samaritans?

9. a. Why is it significant that Philip, a Jew, went to Samaria?

b. What would be the modern equivalent to that step?

10. From Acts 8:6-8 describe the effects of Philip's preaching in Samaria.

11. How is the "Gospel of grace" breaking through the prejudices in your life? Give an example.

For 700 years bitter hatred had existed between the Jews and Samaritans. Now, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the church was moving across another cultural threshold. This is all the more remarkable since the people to whom Philip preached had previously been under the influence of a magician call Simon, who had managed to "pull the wool over the eyes" of the Samaritans for years.

12. How were the Samaritans viewing Simon the magician (sorcerer in some translations)? See Acts 8:10-11.
13. How was Simon's life affected by the Gospel message (verses 12-13)?

The spread of the Gospel to the Samaritans was such a remarkable step that Peter and John were sent to Samaria to see what was happening. Later in Acts, Barnabas is sent from Jerusalem to observe the evangelism of the Gentiles in Antioch. So, it appears that new advances of the Gospel were examined with care by the Jerusalem church.

14. Why do you think God sovereignly delayed the coming of the Spirit in this case (Acts 8:14-17)?

Reread Acts 8:18-25.

15. Was Simon really saved or was he just faking it? How does Peter forcefully answer this question? (Acts 8:18-22.)
16. Why might Simon have been bitter about what was happening in Samaria? What still concerned him the most (verse 23-24)?

*Acts chapter 8 records yet another step—another outreach of the Gospel that goes beyond Samaria. As you **read** Acts 8:26-40 notice how God is directly carrying out the Great Commission in this passage. Here we see the first example of one-on-one evangelism in Acts.*

Locate the following on the map 1: Jerusalem, Gaza, Azotus (or Ashdod) and Caesarea.

17. What would it have been like for Philip to leave Samaria where so many exciting things were happening and go down a desert road?

18. What are we told about the man who came from the edge of the known world, whom God had Philip meet on the road to Gaza?

Key words to know and understand:

Eunuch – A castrated man (Deuteronomy 23:1, Isaiah 56:4-5). The term was also used to refer to a court official in the East. *Candace* – A title given to all Ethiopian queens.

The fact that the eunuch was riding in a chariot reveals that he was a well-to-do man. Most people walked or rode animals. The scroll would have cost the eunuch a lot of money, even as a wealthy man. It would have been something he really wanted.

19. Does the memorable story of the Ethiopian eunuch describe a man in search of God, and/or God in search of a man? Explain.
20. What was the common meeting ground between Philip and the Ethiopian? Explain.
21. Acts 8:30-31 underscores the truth that reading Scripture and understanding Scripture are not the same thing. How does the eunuch gain spiritual knowledge and understanding? (See Acts 8:32-35 and John 16:13.)

The Ethiopian was converted—suddenly and dramatically. If we could have caught a glimpse of that chariot with the Ethiopian aboard, we would have seen him *rejoicing* in what God had done for him! *A seed had been planted in Africa for Jesus Christ! He was the first of many Africans who came to know the Savior in the following centuries.*

22. What miraculous events are recorded about Philip in Acts 8:39-40?

In the story of Acts, Philip will decrease and Saul of Tarsus will increase. But the measure of Philip's consecration is that he does this without any hint of complaint or disappointment.

There is a vital principle at work here—one that Luke was intent on ensuring we understand as he tells us the story of the church. It was first taught by Jesus in John 12:24—then through Jesus' extraordinary example on the Cross.

23. After considering Jesus' words in John 12:24, when have you seen the principle that "*dying in one produces life in another,*" at work in Acts? List as many examples as you can.
24. When have you experienced this truth when witnessing for Jesus Christ and the Gospel?