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THE LOOKOUT

OCTOBER 2023

Unit: Acts (Part 1)

Theme: The Church Begins

Overview: Since the creation of Adam and Eve, God has always had a people, but he has not always had a church. Even though the church was envisioned in the great commission of the Old Testament (Genesis 12:1-3), predicted by the prophets during a locust plague (Joel 2:28-32), and promised to the apostles at Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16:13-20), she was not actually born until the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-41). But after her birth, the church spread like fire across the Roman Empire. In this first part of our study of Acts, students will learn about that birth, how the early disciples shared their possessions with any who had need (especially widows), and how Philip the evangelist and Peter the apostle stretched that early church to be more inclusive.

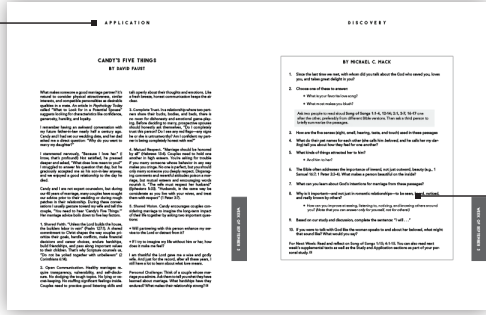
HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

WEEK OF OCTOBER 22, 2023

LESSON AIM: **Be open to people
not like you; share the
gospel with everyone.**

UNIT: Acts (Part 1)

THEME: The Church Begins

LESSON TEXT: Acts 8:4-24

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Acts 1:8; John 4:1-42

PHILIP PREACHES IN SAMARIA

BY MARK SCOTT

Philip the evangelist's name means "lover of horses." This man of God—one of the "magnificent seven" from Acts 6:1-7—certainly "got on his horse" to take the gospel to the Samaritans. Jesus told his disciples that they would be his witnesses "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The geography of this lesson text shifts from Jerusalem (Acts 1-7) to all Judea and Samaria (Acts 8-12). Jesus had already widened the perimeters of the gospel through his sermon in the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4:16-30), in his offer of living water to the woman at the well (John 4:4-14), and in making the Good Samaritan the hero of one of his parables (Luke 10:25-37).

The believers now needed to keep riding that horse (i.e., preaching the gospel) in following their Lord's leading.

God used Stephen's martyrdom as a means of moving the church out of Jerusalem and into the wider world (Acts 8:1-3). Preaching was at the heart of this movement. Two phrases in this lesson text, *preached the word* (v. 4) and *proclaimed the good news* (v. 12), come from a Greek participle that means "evangelizing." And the word *proclaimed* (v. 5) comes from a Greek word that means to "herald the king's message." Finally, the phrase *had accepted the word of God* indicates the Samaritans had welcomed the message of the gospel.

Salvation for the Samaritans

Acts 8:4-8

The apostles stayed in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). Several explanations have been suggested for why they did this; perhaps the apostles were still "highly regarded" in the city (Acts 5:13), and they were not in danger as others might have been. In contrast, the "average Christians" scattered from the city and *preached the word wherever they went*. Thus, those without seminary degrees evangelized.

Luke focuses on Philip's work, perhaps due to Philip's stunning ministry and bold efforts. He *went down* means he left the elevated location of Jerusalem, then journeyed north to a city in Samaria.

Philip's ministry had three parts to it. He preached because the crowds heard him, and they all paid close attention to what he said. He cast out demons (some came out with shrieks). He also healed those who were paralyzed or lame (these definitely were signs of the messianic age—Isaiah 35:5-6). This gospel expansion resulted in great joy.

Salvation for Simon

Acts 8:9-13, 18-24

Simon the Sorcerer is singled out as significant in Samaria. Scholars disagree over whether he was a genuine convert. When Luke writes that a person "*believed and was baptized*," he rather consistently is referring to a person becoming a believer. But Simon seemed to fail in his faith so quickly, much as the Galatian believers did (Galatians 1:6). He was certainly walking on shaky ground.

Simon practiced sorcery (magic—mentioned twice, in verses 9 and 11). He amazed both the high and low. The people thought he was the Great Power of God, and this fed his ego to the point he boasted about himself. But it did not take Simon long to compare the real God-like power to his counterfeit, Satanic-fed power. He got in the baptism line and followed Jesus. He had amazed the people, but now Simon was amazed at Philip's miracles.

If someone can be converted to Christ in an hour (Acts 16:33), can someone backpedal in faith in the same amount of time? Actually, we do not know how much time elapsed between Acts 8:13 and 8:18-19. Maybe it was days (even months?). Perhaps the old temptations crept back, but Simon wanted to buy Holy Spirit power and maybe even apostleship. (Simon's name is the source of the word *simony*, defined as "the buying or selling of a church office or ecclesiastical preferment.") Peter minced no words. Simon Peter told Simon the (former) Sorcerer to repent and pray. Simon then asked Peter to pray for him.

Support from the Apostles

Acts 8:14-17

Many scholars believe these verses are some of the strangest in Acts. They break the norm of hearing, believing, repenting, and being baptized. Word about the Samaritan revival reached Jerusalem. Peter and John were sent to check out the new converts. When they got there, they noticed the absence of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 19:1-7). So, they prayed for the converts and laid hands on them to receive the Spirit.

Most likely the Samaritans had received the Holy Spirit upon their conversion (in keeping with Acts 2:38). What they lacked were miraculous gifts, which demanded apostolic hands. With the gospel's entry into Samaria, a significant step in fulfilling Jesus' commission to the apostles (Acts 1:8), had been achieved. It was important that the apostles witness firsthand this milestone. ■

DON'T GIVE UP ON EVANGELISM

BY DAVID FAUST

“Christians and non-Christians have something in common: We’re both uptight about evangelism,” said Rebecca Pippert in the first line of her book, *Out of the Saltshaker and into the World*.

Our non-Christian neighbors are weary of polarizing political dialogue and are conditioned to distrust religion, making it difficult to initiate conversations about faith. Meanwhile, Christians wonder how to share the good news with those who shy away from churches, consider sin a nonissue, brand Bible believers as judgmental, and assume all go to heaven no matter what they believe. Here are some things I have learned about evangelism.

The gospel of grace should be presented graciously. Remember, Jesus embodied both grace and truth (John 1:14).

Authentic relationships are crucial. On rare occasions, we may get to share the gospel with complete strangers, but more often, opportunities arise in our daily surroundings and networks at home, work, or school, in backyards and coffee shops, at ball games and other places where people gather. Theologian Michael Green wrote that first-century Christians “gossiped the gospel.” For them, sharing the good news wasn’t an awkward duty. Their positive testimony spilled out naturally in ordinary conversation because they were convinced Christ was risen from the dead.

Pre- and post-evangelism matter, too. Crops grow best in well-prepared soil. By

earning trust, building genuine friendships, setting a winsome example, demonstrating God’s love in practical ways, and praying for others, we plant gospel seeds and trust God for the increase. And after repentant believers are baptized, they still need help learning what Jesus commanded (Matthew 28:18-20). Follow-up is crucial as new disciples begin to grow, serve, give, and share their own faith.

Disciple-making is a team effort. It’s not just the preacher’s job. When severe persecution broke out against the

church, “all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1). Ordinary followers of Jesus—not their prominent leaders—scattered like grains of salt seasoning the world. Jesus intended for the gospel to spread in an ever-widening circle to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), but it took persecution to get his followers moving. *Christian Standard* publisher Jerry Harris once wrote, “I am not sure Acts 1:8 would have happened had it not been for Acts 8:1.”

“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went” (Acts 8:4). Persecution forced these “scattered” believers away from their homes. It took courage and faith to leave the familiar streets of Jerusalem—especially for those who ended up in a Samaritan city where objectionable religious practices prevailed and longstanding animosity existed between Jews and Samaritans. But with the Spirit’s help, “wherever they went” (v. 4), enthusiastic believers like Philip overcame their hesitation and preached with surprising success, leading to “great joy in that city” (Acts 8:8) and proving once again that the gospel is “the power of God that brings salvation” (Romans 1:16).

Likewise, in the early days of the Restoration Movement, the gospel spread across the American frontier because ordinary people carried the message and planted churches “wherever they went.”

Someone has said that churches aren’t dying because people aren’t going to church; churches are dying because churches aren’t going to the people. So, instead of trying to make the church more like the world so the world will go to church, what if we try to make the church more like Christ so the church will go to the world?

Personal Challenge: On an index card, write the name of a non-Christian in your circle of influence who needs to hear the gospel. Look at that card each day for a month, praying for an opportunity to deepen your relationship and talk with that person about Jesus. ■

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DISCOVERY

BY DOUG REDFORD

1. Did you “step up” during the past week to increase your involvement with some ministry within your church or to your surrounding community? What steps did you take?
2. What subjects do you find easy to talk about with others (even with complete strangers)? What subjects are harder for you to discuss with others?

Ask two people to read aloud **Acts 8:4-24** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.

3. “Those who had been scattered [following the outbreak of persecution in Jerusalem] preached the word wherever they went” (Acts 8:4). Why didn’t they cower in fear or go into hiding to protect themselves?
4. Why are Christians often hesitant to share their faith with others? What are the specific challenges to sharing one’s faith in the following settings?
 - workplace
 - school
 - neighborhood
 - family
5. There was “great joy” as a result of Philip’s ministry in Samaria (Acts 8:8).
 - How would you define the joy that Jesus offers to us?
 - How does the joy Jesus offers differ from what the world offers?
 - Have you known someone who exhibited “great joy” because of Jesus?
 - How could you tell their joy was real and not just “for show”?
6. Peter described Simon’s heart as “not right before God” (Acts 8:21). How does one maintain a heart that stays “right before God”?
 - What in today’s culture makes “heart health” challenging to maintain?
7. Mark Scott describes Simon’s ego being fed by people calling him the “Great Power of God” (Acts 8:10).
 - How can our egos get in the way of a close relationship with God?
 - How do we keep our egos under control?
8. What makes the difference between a person faithfully following the Lord and someone who chooses to follow, then falls away quickly or fails repeatedly?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: “I will . . .”
10. At the beginning of each day this coming week, write down one recommendation for yourself as part of a personal prescription for spiritual “heart health.” Ask the Lord (the Great Physician) for his help in following your prescription.

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Acts 9:32-43**. You can also read next week’s supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. ■