Acts 8A

- At the beginning of our study, I explained that the book of Acts has many features that provide structure and divide the book into clearly identifiable parts or sections
  - Without reviewing all those divisions again, let me point out one such division taking place here as we leave chapter 7 and enter chapter 8
    - To this point in the story of Acts, the message of the Gospel has been preached exclusively to the Jews in Jerusalem
      - Peter has led this charge together with John
      - And now these early believers are experiencing the beginning of persecution from the very same Jews who were offered the message of hope
    - God always intended that the message of the Gospel would be delivered to Jews first, since “salvation is of the Jews” as Jesus says in John 4
      - Paul reiterates this priority in Rom 1:16:
        
        **Rom. 1:16** ¶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.
        
        - The events of chapter 7 become the justification and the means by which God moves the Gospel outwardly to the next intended audience, the Samaritans
  - After the death of Stephen, persecution of Christians in Jerusalem began a new phase
    - The trial and stoning of Stephen was a turning point, and the event itself was somewhat unusual
      - The Jews lacked the power of the sword under Roman authority, so stoning Stephen could have resulted in the participants being charged with murder under Roman law
      - The fact that so many were willing to engage in the stoning indicates that they were operating under different rules at the time
• One explanation is that the Roman Senate had removed the right for Jewish execution under all circumstances except one
  o Offenses against the Temple could be punished by death in Israel
  o This was the charge against Stephen
• Another explanation is that this event occurred during a short window in AD 36 between the departure of Pilate and the arrival of his replacement, when Roman rule wasn’t present in the city
• But as the city saw and heard of the stoning of a Christian, the attitude of the city toward the new movement changed dramatically
  o Jews within the city turned on the believing Jews, particularly the Hellenistic Jews, the group to which Stephen belonged
  o Essentially, the Jewish population had heard the testimony of Stephen at his public trial and had rejected it soundly
    ▪ And for the most part, the rest of the city followed suit in that rejection
    ▪ Where before the people of Jerusalem were flocking to the church in great number, now they turned away out of fear or disapproval
  o So naturally, this changed the nature of ministry in the early church
    ▪ First, it moved the disciples outward from the city to safer areas of Palestine and the diaspora
    ▪ Secondly, it caused the disciples to direct their message to non-Jewish audiences who were not already opposed to the message
• God was justified in moving the Gospel away from the Jews and toward a Gentile audience on the basis of the sign of Jonah
  o When Jesus declared that the Jewish nation had rejected Him and lost their opportunity to receive him (in Luke 13:34-35), he told the Pharisees that the nation would only receive the “sign of Jonah” henceforth (see Matt 12)
    ▪ The sign of Jonah is the sign of a resurrection
Jesus’ own resurrection was the fulfillment of that sign, and here we see that sign repeated through Stephen’s testimony of that resurrection

- As Stephen testified in the trial concerning Jesus and His resurrection, the crowd rejected that testimony
- Rather than receiving the sign of resurrection, they stoned the messenger

The Lord will again give Israel the sign of resurrection in the last days during Tribulation

- The two witnesses will undergo a visible resurrection following their deaths
  - And this resurrection will be a sign to that future generation of Israel of the truth of the two witnesses’ testimony concerning Jesus
  - Of course, that future generation of Israel will also reject the sign in the moment it will be given
  - Now since the nation of Israel has rejected the sign of resurrection given in Stephen’s testimony, the gospel will move away from them and to a new people group: the Samaritans

But first, we begin chapter 8 with three verses to bridge us into the rest of the chapter

**Acts 8:1** ¶ Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. ¶ And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

**Acts 8:2** Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him.

**Acts 8:3** But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.

- Saul approved of what he saw happening to Stephen
  - The Greek word for hearty agreement means that Paul didn’t instigate the action against Stephen, but he liked it and decided to make it his own cause
- So Saul becomes a self-appointed vigilante to find and eliminate the Jewish Christians
- Many disciples leave the city and go into Samaria
• But the apostles, we’re told remain behind in the city

• This fact becomes important later in chapter 8

  o Stephen we’re told is buried by devout Jewish men who mourn his death

    ▪ The Jewish customs and rabbinical law forbid public lamentations for anyone who was put to death by stoning

    ▪ So Luke’s mention of these lamentations seemed intended to reflect that not all Jews within the city were in agreement with the verdict and execution of Stephen

      ▪ This statement stands in contrast with Saul’s hearty agreement

• We can’t help but notice that Saul has become the catalyst God is using to move the Gospel outward from Jerusalem

  o It’s likely that had persecution never come to the early church, the leaders may have never ventured far from the city in preaching the Gospel

    ▪ They certainly wouldn’t have considered going outside Judea

    ▪ And the fact that the Apostles aren’t willing to leave even now that persecution has begun indicates their reluctance to move outward

  o Consider this interesting fact: Saul later becomes Paul, the man credited to be the single greatest evangelist in the history of church

    ▪ God used Paul’s ministry to preach the gospel to Gentiles in many new places and explain the full doctrines of the church

    ▪ And yet here we see Saul - who has not yet come to faith himself - being used by God in exactly the same way!

      ▪ Saul is responsible for moving the Gospel outwardly from Jerusalem

  o Perhaps Paul was thinking of this very irony when he wrote Romans 8:28:

    Rom. 8:28 ¶ And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.
• Whether as Saul persecuting or as Paul preaching, this man was used by God to move His word to the nations

• Now we move forward looking at a second one of the early deacons

  o First we had Stephen, now we have Philip, and notice Luke’s connecting verse:

Acts 8:4 ¶ Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.

  o Do you remember on the first night of the class I mentioned that the main thrust of Luke’s account is not the work of the apostles

  ▪ Rather, Luke emphasizes the work of the Spirit and power and importance of God’s word in building the Church

    ▪ Here’s one of those moments when Luke pauses to make clear that the instrument God uses to move His church outward from Jerusalem is the preaching of His word

    ▪ Had the disciples merely scattered without preaching the word, perhaps instead trying to persuade men with human wisdom

    ▪ The scattering would have accomplished nothing

  o The Greek word for scattered is diaspeiro, which is the same word used for the scattering of seed on a field

    ▪ It may cause you to remember the parable of the sower and the seed, where the spread of the Gospel is compared to the scattering of seed

  ▪ This scattering led to many important changes in the early church

    o For example, the Gospels were written because of this movement away from Jerusalem

      ▪ While the church was largely centered in Jerusalem with the apostles nearby, no one had need of a written Gospel account

      ▪ And questions regarding Jesus’ teaching or the events of His ministry were handled in person during church services or in one-on-one questioning

      ▪ Once the saints began to spread out into Judea and beyond, the need for a written record became obvious
Since the early church was mostly Jewish, the first Gospel account was written by the Apostle Matthew so that a Jewish audience could understand how Jesus was the Messiah.

Later, other apostles write their Gospel accounts to serve different, non-Jewish audiences.

- Secondly, the apostles began to write letters to newly founded churches to encourage and instruct new believers in the absence of personal visits.
  - As with the Gospel, the earliest epistles were the Jewish epistles (James, I & II Peter, Hebrews, and Jude) written to the dispersed Jewish believers.

- Third, church leadership was decentralized as local, non-apostolic leaders established in each city to steward their congregations.

- Finally, formal doctrines and creeds of the Christian faith belief emerged from out of the apostles’ writings.
  - These doctrines bound the dispersed congregations together in spirit, and to contend with false teaching whenever it emerged.

Against that backdrop, we begin the story of Philip now.

*Acts 8:5* Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them.

*Acts 8:6* The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing.

*Acts 8:7* For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed.

*Acts 8:8* So there was much rejoicing in that city.

- Philip goes down to the city of Samaria.
  - Samaria was not actually a city in Philip’s day, but rather a region directly north of Jerusalem.
    - Luke says Philip went “down” because any direction away from the Temple mount is considered “down” to a Jew.
    - This reference is one reason some believe Luke may have been Jewish rather than Gentile.
Secondly, Luke says the “city” of Samaria to indicate some population center within the region, not to mean a specific city called Samaria.

- In the Greek, Luke says that Philip was continuously preaching or proclaiming Christ to the people in Samaria.
  - In other words, Philip was preaching to Samaritans.

- Samaritans were an interesting group historically.
  - In a sense we could say they were neither entirely Jewish nor entirely Gentile.
    - They were a people who descended from these Jews who escaped the Assyrian captivity of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and remained in the
    - While living in the land, they began to inter-marry with the surrounding Gentile peoples.
    - When the Jews were led back into the land by Zerubbable after the Babylonian captivity, they encountered these halfbreed Jews still living in Samaria.
  - The returning Jews no longer regarded these descendants of the Northern Kingdom to be true Jews.
    - And they were correct: Samaritans aren’t Jews any longer.
      - In defiance to the returning Jews, the Samaritans tried to recreate their Jewish heritage in a counterfeit manner.
      - They created a distorted version of the Mosaic Law and build their own temple and established their own priesthood and worship.
    - Meanwhile, they became bitter enemies with the Jews.
  - Jews hated Samaritans even more than other Gentiles because they were impostors pretending to be Jewish.
    - You can see this rivalry throughout the Gospel accounts.
    - The woman at the well in John 4 is a classic example.

- As the Gospel moves outward from Jerusalem, we said earlier in the study that it will move through three distinct phases.
First it goes to the Jews in Jerusalem

- Secondly, it moves out of Judea and into Samaria and to Samaritans
- Lastly, it reaches Greek Gentiles across the entire world

Since Samaritans are simply an unique group of Gentiles, why are they given a unique status in the progression of the Gospel?

- The reason is connected to their historic role as impostors of the Jewish faith
  - The Samaritans had made a practice of counterfeiting everything of significance within Jewish religious practice
  - With each counterfeit, the Samaritans reinforced the notion that they were the true practitioners of the Jewish faith and the rightful heirs to the promise given to Abraham
- Now that the long-awaited Jewish Messiah had come in fulfillment of that promise, it was likely that the Samaritans might concoct another counterfeit
  - They might propose the arrival of their own “messiah” and complicate the spread of the Gospel among the citizens of Judea and Samaria
  - At this early vulnerable stage of growth, the Lord saw fit to bring Samaritans into the church rather than compete with their false message

With each new movement of the church, we are going to see a repeating of the pattern that was established in the beginning

- When the church first arrived to Jews, the message of the Gospel was accompanied by
  - Signs & miracles
  - Power over the demonic realm
  - The delayed indwelling of the Holy Spirit
  - Large numbers of converts in a brief time
Therefore, we shouldn’t be surprised to see that pattern repeat when the Gospel first arrives for this new group in Samaria

- Interestingly, the signs are performed by a delegate of the Apostles rather than by an Apostle personally
- Because the Apostles had not yet understood the necessity of moving beyond a Jewish audience in spreading the Gospel
  - This issue comes to a head in Acts 10-11

- Looking at the text, Philip preaches and crowds respond
  - Specifically, the crowds were of “one accord” or one mind in their response
    - In contrast to the resistance seen in Jerusalem, here the crowds were uniformly receiving the Gospel message
      - This is similar to the way the crowd in Jerusalem received the Gospel at Pentecost and immediately following
    - Naturally, their attention was directed on Philip because he was performing miraculous signs accomplished by the Spirit in conformation of the truth of his message
      - So the signs were used to attract attention for Philip’s message
      - And the message was received in part out of a recognition that it came by the power of God
  - At this point we’re introduced to a new character, Simon

Acts 8:9 Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; Acts 8:10 and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, “This man is what is called the Great Power of God.”
Acts 8:11 And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts.
Acts 8:12 But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike.
Acts 8:13 Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.
• Simon the magician is a curious and often debated fellow
  o His may be the first religious charlatan to infiltrate the Christian church
    • If there had been cable TV, “prayer cloths,” and toll-free donation phone lines in this day, Simon probably would have been the first to employ them
  o Luke says he was performing magic, astonishing the people, and claiming to be someone great
    • In fact the people were calling Simon, the Great Power of God
  o It's interesting to see right from the beginning how Luke juxtaposes Simon and Phillip
    • Phillip is astonishing the people, as is Simon
      • But Phillip’s work is the result of God’s power
      • While Simon’s work is the result of magic, dark arts
        o Real power, but demonic
    • Simon’s work is intended to make himself look powerful and important before the people – and it was working
      • While Phillip’s work causes the people to rejoice and give God glory
  o Based on Philip’s preaching, the church has been established in this place and is starting to grow
    • And the re-emergence of miracles for the sake of the Samaritans was intended affirm the truth of Philip’s teaching in the same way that it did in Jerusalem
      • The Holy Spirit is not yet seen to indwell the new believers though
    • Why does the arrival of the Spirit wait under these circumstances?
      • In the case of Jerusalem, the Spirit’s arrival was delayed until a certain day in order to fulfill the Feast of Pentecost
      • Here the delay is different
The primary purpose for a delay here was to make an impression on a different audience - the apostles themselves

- Keep in mind that the indwelling of the HS is the mark of faith
- So it served as a powerful sign to anyone of where true faith was present

- Now speaking of powerful signs, Simon has a pretty good thing going here
  - Within his community he is the leading spiritual attraction
    - And like the Pharisees in Jerusalem, anything that contends with his prominence is a threat
    - So the arrival of a competitor wielding even greater power bothers Simon greatly
  - Simon we’re told is so impressed by Philip, that he “believes” and submits to water baptism
    - Even after the baptism, he continues to follow Philip around “observing” the miracles
      - The word for observing is theoreo, which carries the sense of studying or examining something
      - Simon was following Philip out of professional curiosity
    - It causes us to wonder about what Luke means when he says “believes”
      - Could Simon have made a confession without actually accepted the Gospel truly?

- The news of Philip’s ministry soon reached the apostles in Jerusalem, and of course they were surprised to hear of it

Acts 8:14 ¶ Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John,
Acts 8:15 who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit.
Acts 8:16 For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.
Acts 8:17 Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.
• Peter and John are not assigned the duty of going to Samaria and investigating this news
  o The fact that they go at all tells us how concerned they were by this news
    • Don’t read v.14 and v.15 together too quickly
    • If you do, it will sound as if the purpose of their travel to Samaria was to lay on hands, as if that was the expected function of the Apostles
  o This isn’t the proper reading
    • They came to investigate and validate that the Samaritans were actually being called into the truth faith
      • Rather than simply mimicking the Jews once again
    • Once they arrived, then they performed these activities in response to the faith they found
  o The apostles were an important part of this event, because their presence validated their experience
    • It also confirmed again that Peter had the keys to the Kingdom
    • And he was now enlisted to recognize the expansion of the church beyond Jews and the entry of Samaritans into the Kingdom by faith
      • This is why the baptism of the Holy Spirit had not yet occurred
      • Peter is always involved in the first faith experience for every new group (Jew, Samaritan, Gentile) because he held the “keys” according to Jesus direction
      • This also ensured that Peter was able to personally witness God’s work through the Spirit and understand himself that these new groups were joining the church
  • Finally, John is included here as well, perhaps because of his early desire to destroy the Samaritans when they reject Jesus during the Gospel account
    o After this moment, John is never mentioned again in the book of Acts