

## PHILIP THE EVANGELIST

Acts 8

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Some years ago, in Sydney, I took my ministry apprentice to a training event on street evangelism. My trainee thought it would just be a seminar. He was relaxed to just listen for the afternoon. But there was only a ten-minute briefing on how to approach people on the street. Then the presenter said 'Right let's hit the street. Let's do it. We will debrief later.' I can still remember the look on my trainee's face. He went completely white as the blood drained from his face. I think it's a fair comment to suggest many of us would feel the same. I must admit at times when I have been at an evangelism conference, I felt inadequate. Invariably the key speaker is an extravert American. Usually he would tell us that as he flew over to Australia, he presented the gospel to those who sat next to him on the plane. And at least one was converted, or some such story. Being the introvert, on my plane flights I quietly read a book. What did you do when you last flew somewhere? How many people did you share the gospel with? Let's be honest we all need to be encouraged to witness. I want to put it to you that God has always needed to encourage his people in witnessing.

We see it in the opening verses of Acts 8. *"And Saul was there, giving approval to [Stephen's] death"*. We saw in Acts 7 Stephen was martyred because he challenged the Sanhedrin by standing up for Jesus. But, look at what happened as a result (Acts 8:1-4). *"...On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went."* The persecution was terrible. But look at what God did with it. Where are the Christians scattered to? *"...Judea and Samaria"*. Remember Jesus command in Acts 1:8? *"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and ...in all Judea and Samaria, ...."* Up to this point the preaching and witnessing had occurred only in Jerusalem. And it was done by the apostles, mostly by Peter and John. But, because of the persecution, the believers were scattered to the areas Jesus said were to be evangelised next. And look at who did the preaching: *"Those who were scattered preached the word wherever they went."* Through the oppression they were forced from their homes. God used that situation to encourage the Jewish believers to go out and witness. Which they all did, wherever they went. As they were scattered across the

country, they 'gossiped the gospel' constantly. You can imagine all these people fleeing as refugees. The people in the Judean countryside and Samaria would have been asking, 'So how come you are all out here?' In response the Christians from Jerusalem would have explained how they were persecuted. That would have led to being asked why? To which the people would have to explain about Jesus and his resurrection. This sort of thing has happened on numerous occasions in history. One example is of the Moravians persecuted in Eastern Europe in the 18th century. They were forced to move across Europe and eventually to the United States. They had a big impact in their witnessing wherever they went. Think about all the migration of people from Europe after the Second World War to Australia. Were these migrations just wanting to get to a better country for their families? Or was it also God's encouragement to take the gospel to another country? It was the Dutch migrants with their 'reformational thinking of all of life for Christ' that set up a major Christian School movement in this country. It is fascinating to see in our text how God even used people who were against the gospel. We notice how Paul was systematically dragging off Christians. No wonder they fled. So, ironically, God used Paul to spread the gospel, to get the Christians out into Judea and Samaria. God was using Paul, even before he had converted him. Are we aware of how God in his providence is spreading the gospel around the world today?

Now of all the scattered Christians, Luke tells us in detail about one of them (Acts 8:5), "*Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there*". Philip was not one of the apostles. He was one of the seven appointed to care for the Greek widows. But he had a gift and a passion for evangelism. The first thing we see is Philip's interaction with 'Simon the sorcerer'. Have you ever heard of the word 'simony'? It is the 'act of selling church positions or roles.' The word gets its meaning from the story here about Simon. Simon, we are told, 'practiced sorcery' and 'magic'. This was not slight- of-hand magic. This was dealing with evil spirits. The crowds had given Simon 'their attention' and were 'amazed' at what he could do. But when Philip came along, they recognised a greater power. Even Simon did. He knew the power of manipulating the unseen spirits. So, he was astonished at the 'miraculous signs' Philip did in the power of the Holy Spirit. Luke tells us (Acts 8:13) "*Simon himself believed and was baptised*". But was it a true conversion or just wanting to get in with the action? We see Simon offered money to Peter and John (Acts 8:18 & 19) to have the power to do what they did. That tells us something was not right. In fact, Peter spoke very strongly to him. The direct translation of the Greek is (Acts 8:20) "*Peter answered To hell with you and your money!*" He wasn't swearing, he meant it literally. Peter saw that Simon, while saying he believed could have no part in the ministry. You can't be in ministry if your heart is not right with God. So, Peter said (Acts 8:22) "*Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. I see you*

*are full of bitterness and captive to sin."* It is a strong reminder to all of us that not everyone who has been part of the church was necessarily a true believer. We spoke last time about 'nominal' Christianity. For years, in the West, we have had a cultural Christianity. Lots of church goers have gone through the motions but didn't really accept the Bible or all it says about Jesus. There's been an Australian archbishop who denied the virgin birth or that Jesus is God's Son. Throughout history there have been those who bought their positions as bishops because they wanted the prestige and wealth. We read that Simon (Acts 8:9) *"...boasted that he was someone great, 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.'" Talk of being on an ego trip. Simon's thoughts were about himself. 'Here let me buy your power so I can give the spectacular Holy Spirit as well. Then the people will look at me again'. If ever a person's ministry is so spectacular that everyone idolises them things are not right. If someone in ministry starts to talk in terms of 'trust me', 'trust in my prayers for healing', 'trust in my vision', you know there will be trouble. Simon had not truly repented as Peter pointed out. He had not broken down in deep humility and recognised his need for God's grace.*

What we have here is another attack by the devil from within the church. It's similar to what happened with Ananias and Sapphira. Pretending to be something you aren't to have your accolades and your money. To get glory for yourself instead of giving it to God. God dealt very severely with Ananias and Sapphira. It brought 'great fear' on the whole church. It had to be done. Nothing is more destructive to the church than unconverted people, parading as Christians. When you have that situation there is no genuine interest in witnessing for Jesus. There's no deep concern for others and being co-workers with God to bring hope. It's about self-interest, like Simon in this passage. Please note the warning here. I need to ask you to consider whether you have really seen your need for God's grace. Is church just part of the culture you have become accustomed to? Is your focus mainly on your own welfare? Or are you desiring to serve Jesus? Perhaps, you have never really thought about it. Please do. It would be heartbreaking if God were to say, using Peter's words, 'To hell with you...' To speak like that is not to judge. Calling for repentance is an act of grace to receive God's mercy. It's a call to truly be a child of God and bask in his love. The danger for the church is where there is no genuine conversion there is no real knowledge of the resurrected Jesus. Then the church loses its passion and zeal for the gospel. And the community loses its avenue of hope.

We see in these verses another issue. Peter and John came down from Jerusalem to give the new Christians at Samaria the Holy Spirit. This raises some difficult questions, with all sorts of interpretations. How could they be converted, yet not have the Spirit?

There are those who argue this shows we need the second blessing of the Spirit to be filled with the Spirit. To keep it simple, what happened in that scene is that the apostles demonstrated the unity of the church. Remember this was Samaria. The Samaritans were hated by the Jews, seen as half-caste pagans. There was a long history going back to the time of the Assyrians. The people of the northern ten tribes of Israel were overrun and intermarried with pagans. The Samaritans worshipped God and followed the Law of Moses. But they did not follow the prophets and other writings of the Old Testament. It was a massive shift in thinking to see the gospel accepted by Samaritans. It would have been very easy for a separate Samaritan church to have been formed. But Peter and John coming from Jerusalem and giving the Holy Spirit through the 'laying on of hands', were demonstrating they were all one church. Whether Jew or Samaritan, they were all together one people. All of them came to accept Jesus and all of them received the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit bridged centuries of hate. A real sign of the Spirit's presence is humility, love and unity. An acceptance of one another, irrespective of background or race, is an act of the Spirit. If you love Jesus, and I love Jesus, we are brothers and sisters, one family. Where a church divides it shows the Spirit is not being heeded. Humility, a deep desire to serve Jesus and witness for him are signs of the Spirit being present and listened to.

Now speaking of listening to the Spirit, we see Philip doing just that. (Acts 8:26-27) *"Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Go south to the road- the desert road- that goes south from Jerusalem to Gaza. So, he started out and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch..."* What's happening here? Jesus once described the Spirit to Nicodemus as being like the wind, blowing where it wills. Often when we witness, we just go about our ordinary lives and talk about Jesus to the people we come across. Like the apostles. (Acts 8:25) *"When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan towns".* You get the picture. On the way home, Peter and John preached along where they were going anyway. If you like to witness, you will even talk to the checkout person when you buy your groceries. But with Philip and the Ethiopian we have something very different. The Spirit gave direct guidance as to where Philip should be. Not around Samaria, but miles away on a very isolated desert road down south. There was nothing there except this chariot which happens to come along with an Ethiopian eunuch. Notice how the Spirit is perfectly timing everything. The eunuch, as a convert to Judaism, is longing for deeper things with God. As the chariot approaches, Philip hears the Ethiopian reading Isaiah 53. What a wonderful Spirit given opportunity to present the gospel. Philip asks (Acts 8:30) *"Do you understand what you are reading". 'No? OK I'm happy to tell you.'* What was the point of travelling 150 kilometres away to some desolate spot to convert and baptise this one man? Well, because God said so. God is sovereign and chooses whom he will.

God through this one influential man was bringing the gospel to a whole new area. History records a strong church in Ethiopia. One can imagine this treasurer of the Candace, the queen, sharing the gospel with all who would listen. And it happened because Philip listened to the Spirit. Why is this story in Acts? It demonstrates one of the ways the Spirit leads his people in sharing the gospel. Yes, we are called to witness as we go about life. But sometimes the Spirit may be calling us to do something out of the ordinary. Are we attuned to that? Is there something specific the Spirit is prompting us to do? Dr Martin Lloyd Jones speaking about Phillip and the eunuch said 'If you read the history of the [church regarding] God's people throughout the centuries and especially the history of revivals, you will find that this is something which is perfectly clear and definite—[people] have been told by the Holy Spirit to do something; they knew it was the Holy Spirit speaking to them, and it transpired that it obviously was his leading. It seems clear to me that if we deny such a possibility, we are again guilty of quenching the Spirit.'

So, is God stirring our nest, putting on pressure to spread his gospel? Are we listening to the Spirit, listening to his call to witness about our experience of Jesus? Witnessing, by definition, is to speak of what you have experienced. If you haven't really received Jesus as Lord, then you can't witness about him. So, hear Jesus' plea today, to come to him, and experience the joy of forgiveness and being one of God's children.