

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY

PART NINE - CHAPTERS 8 AND 9

Plan D, outright persecution, was the biggest failure of all, and Saul of Tarsus was its chief executive. The church had multiplied rapidly but so far been confined to Jerusalem. The sheer thrill of fast growth and big numbers would have made it attractive to stay where the action was. The Lord had given them a job to do; they were to be His witnesses in "Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and even to the remotest part of the earth." (Acts 1:8) For the moment they were stuck at step one, Jerusalem. Overnight everything changed. To remain in Jerusalem was to risk their freedom or even their lives. Very sensibly almost the whole church scattered throughout Judea and Samaria to fulfil parts two and three of the commission. (8:1-5) It was a great example of Rom.8:28 in action.

The apostles stayed in Jerusalem, despite the dangers, to begin a new task of outreach. Their vast congregation had disappeared. It was probably good for both the apostles and the rest of the church. The apostles were back to grass roots evangelism and the church had to depend on God, not the apostles.

Philip and others who followed later to Samaria had to discover how the Lord in them overcame their Jewish prejudice against the hated Samaritans. The Samaritans were descended from a mixture of Israelite, Canaanite and Assyrian stock. They claimed that they, not the Jews, were the true people of God. They had their own temple on Mount Gerizim (Jn.4:20), their own scriptures, mainly the first five books of the Old Testament, and their own priests. To the Jews they were worse than the heathen, therefore only those full of the Holy Spirit (6:3) would have anything to offer to Samaria. Otherwise their prejudice would show in their distaste for those they witnessed to, and in an air of superiority. The special history and false claims of the Samaritans were the reasons for God's particular way of dealing with them in chapter 8.

When Philip arrived in Samaria, God worked miracles through him and people were impressed. (8:5-8) However there was competition from a man named Simon who was also working miracles by means of the occult, attracting a following. (8:9-11) The difference was in their message. Philip preached Christ. (8:5,12) Simon preached Simon. (8:9) Both drew followers but Philip's message prevailed as more and more believed him and finally even Simon himself believed him. (8:12,13)

On the face of it the battle was won, but when Peter and John arrived from Jerusalem they found something was missing - someone, the Holy Spirit. (8:14-16) On the basis of Rom.8:9 the Samaritans were not yet Christians. It was not until Peter and John laid hands on them that the Lord came into their lives. They had believed the preacher but not yet the Lord Jesus. They had been baptised in water but they had not yet become part of Him. (I Cor.12:13) Simon himself revealed the problem. His heart had not yet changed; he had not yet repented. (8:21-23) Laying on hands pictures submission of our will to the will of God (I Pet.5:6) which is what repentance is about. In particular, they had not yet repented of their sin as a nation in claiming that they were right with God, when they were not. Allowing Peter and John, leaders of the Christian church which had come from the Jewish Christ, to lay hands on them, was their final acknowledgement that they had been wrong.

Far from being an exception to the New Testament principle that we only become Christians when Christ's Spirit enters us, this story agrees with that principle and teaches us a very important practical lesson about evangelism. How dangerous it is to assume people have truly repented and trusted Christ just because they have responded to the preacher and even been baptised. An interest in the commercial possibilities of Christian ministry may well be a strong clue that even baptised church members have never really met Christ.

Philip's meeting with the Ethiopian minister of finance gave a magnificent demonstration of effective witnessing. He obeyed God's prompting to be in the right place at the right time,(8:26) and to reach out to the right person.(8:29) Because he knew how to listen to God he also listened to the Ethiopian and found that God had done a superb job by preparing him through His word.(8:30) He had been reading Isaiah and had just reached chapter 53 with its amazing description of the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross. The timing was perfect.(8:32) Philip asked questions to discover what the man understood already, instead of making statements.(8:30) He answered in terms of Jesus the questions the Ethiopian was asking instead of the one he was not, as we so often do.(8:35) Having learned from his time in Samaria, Philip was only willing to baptise the Ethiopian when he clearly professed a faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.(8:36-38) The Spirit in His wisdom removed Philip immediately contrary to all we teach about discipling new converts.(8:39,40) The Ethiopian had the Spirit of God and the word of God, and he could read. What more did he need? According to the tradition of the Ethiopian church he became the first missionary to his people.

And so the gospel reached to one of the remotest parts of the earth. In chapter 9 another man was converted who would be God's instrument in taking the gospel to many other remote places.

9:1,2 Q.1 What motivated Saul's fanatical campaign against Christians? What conclusion can we draw when people go out of their way to persecute Christians today? Why were Christians called those 'belonging to the way'?

9:3-9 Q.2 Who else in the Old Testament had been confronted with God in such a dramatic way?(Exod.3; Num.22; Isa.6; Ezek.1) What do all these stories have in common with the Lord meeting Saul? Does it not seem unfair that Saul was given this special opportunity not given to most unbelievers?

9:3-9 Q.3 What would have been so surprising to Saul about the Lord's words in verse 4? Does his response mean that he became a Christian on the road to Damascus? Why do you suppose that the Lord made him blind?(Jn.9:39-41)

9:10-12 Q.4 Why do you think God gave such precise and detailed instructions to Ananias? What clues does this conversation with the Lord give us as to why we often feel God does not guide us in witnessing?

9:13-16 Q.5 What reason did Ananias have to be fearful about the instructions he received? Are we allowed to argue with God? What does He do if we argue? What indication did God give Ananias about His plans for Saul? Do we receive a glimpse of our future ministry?

9:17,18 Q.6 At what point in this account does Saul actually become a Christian?(Acts 22:16) What practical lessons from this story can we learn about the process that leads to conversion?

9:19-25 Q.7 Once Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit the change in him was dramatic. How had his message to his fellow Jews changed? What does this tell us about the importance of young Christians really knowing their Bibles?

9:26-31 Q.8 What difficulty arose when Saul first tried to have fellowship with the Jerusalem Christians? In what ways do young Christians today have similar problems with integration into the church? How did Barnabas help? How can we help? Why did the church send Saul to Tarsus?

9:32-43 Q.9 Luke now describes two miracles God did through Peter in the lives of Christians. What does each miracle picture of the work of God in our lives in a spiritual sense? What effect did each miracle have on the communities in which Aeneas and Tabitha lived?