

WHITE MEMORIAL

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

WMPC – Men’s Bible Study

Acts

Lesson 4

Read Acts 8 - 9:19

3 Questions:

Q1: First, a set of rapid fire questions about the early verses of Acts 8.

- The disciples and apostles are scattered by persecution. Is this a good turn of events or a bad turn of events for the early church?
- Stephen is buried. Saul persecutes the church. Philip goes “down to” Samaria. Why is it “going down” to Samaria? What is surprising about Philip’s going to Samaria in the first place?
- What do you make of the Samaritan Simon? Notice he plays a huge role in the first 25 verses. Does he ever change his tune - is he always “just a fortune hunter”? Do you trust his “repentance?” Tougher still - how do you know when to trust “repentance” in a person’s life?
- There seems to be a difference declared between being baptized by water and being baptized in the Holy Spirit. What do you think of this distinction? Has your church celebrated that distinction, assumed that these “two baptisms” are concurrent, or emphasized one and not the other?
- Why do you think Peter follows Philip to Samaria?
- Peter says to Simon of Samaria: “your heart is not right before God.” What does this mean? What does a heart which is right before God look like?

Q2: Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch represent one of the most beloved and important conversion stories of the entire New Testament. Notice at verse 26 it begins with an “angel of the Lord” who sends Philip to Gaza, which is in the wilderness (does this sound familiar? How does God/Holy Spirit use the wilderness?). As you read about this eunuch, some questions:

- Does it matter that he is Ethiopian? Why?
- Does it matter that he is a eunuch? Why?
- Do you know the section of Isaiah that the eunuch is reading? What verses?
- Why is it amazing that Philip baptizes the eunuch? Do you think Philip has permission from the ruling council to baptize like this? Where baptism is concerned, does permission matter? Why or why not?
- What does the Holy Spirit do to Philip once the eunuch is baptized? Is this surprising?

Q3: Saul becomes Paul. Is there a more famous instant conversion story in all the Bible? We don’t think so. Acts 9 is thus beloved the world over by Christian people.

- Why does Jesus intervene with Saul? Jesus has been “absent” since the ascension why show up now?
- 9:9 — Anything surprising about the three days? What do we expect to happen to Saul/Paul after these three days?
- The other Ananias (notice he is a disciple in Damascus - you might wonder, how did this Ananias get there?): do you sympathize with his protest? Why or why not?

- God's answer to Ananias is direct. How does God choose people to be instruments? If we were to argue that Acts 9:15 is one of the most important verses of the Bible, would we right to do so?

3 Insights:

I1: From William Willimon:

"A long history of enmity between Jews and Samaritans lies behind this account of the mission into Samaria. While the Samaritans were considered by many Jews to be racially impure and religiously inferior, they did worship Israel's God, observed Moses' laws, and looked forward to the arrival of a messianic figure. But that has accounted for little in the conventional Jewish evaluation of Samaritans.... Samaritans appeared elsewhere in Luke's story (Luke 9:51-56; 10:29-37; 17:11)....Matthew's Jesus tells his disciples, 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of Samaritans' (Matthew 10:5). Yet here is Philip out among the Samaritans. In Philip's conversion in Samaria yet another miracle is being worked: nationalistic recrimination is being overcome through the Spirit: Jew and Samaritan are being joined." (Willimon, Acts, 1988, JKP, page 68)

I2: From Willie Jennings:

"The Spirit is Lord of the road. The scene that now unfolds is astonishing and a little comedic. A fine chariot moves by, and on it at least one driver and his chauffeured rider, an Ethiopian eunuch. Before we turn to the specifics of this exalted rider we must hear the Spirit's instruction to Philip. 'Catch him!' Running, Philip comes next to the moving chariot, and he hears the eunuch reading Isaiah, and then he asks the question, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' (v. 30) The question and the position from which it is being asked are both crucial, because together they show us more of God's lowliness and boundary-transgressing love. God is chasing after this eunuch. We can say this because Philip has been brought exactly to this point by the Holy Spirit. He must run behind the horses, because God will not leave this traveler alone with the text." (Jennings, Acts, 2017, WKJP page 82)

I3: From N.T. Wright:

"If the death and resurrection of Jesus is the hinge on which the great door of history swung open at last, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus was the moment when all the ancient promises of God gathered themselves up, rolled themselves into a ball and came hurtling through that open door and out into the wide world beyond. The story was so important to Luke that he tells it no fewer than three times — here in Acts 9 and then again from Paul's own lips in chapters 22 and 26. Everything that Saul said and did from that moment on, and particularly everything that he wrote, flowed from that sudden, shocking seeing of Jesus."

(Wright, Acts: 24 Studies for Individuals and Groups, 2010, IVP Connect, page 48)

3 Links to further study:

L1: In week one, we gave you a link to the The Bible Project and their overview of Acts 1 - 12. Four weeks in, a refresher on their overview might be good. Our section, particularly the section on Paul, begins at the 6 minute mark. Review it again, here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGbNw855ksw>

L2: Below we provide two different links to a near "orthodox" Reformed (read: Presbyterian) view of baptism of the Holy Spirit. You will note that these two blogs might appear to be critical of

contemporary Pentecostalism's take on baptism by the Holy Spirit. We offer these as links to further consider the questions raised by the "two" baptisms in Acts 8 as they took place in Samaria. At stake: is one baptism superior to the other? These "orthodox" Reformed blog entries refute the notion that there is a superiority among the baptisms with succinct biblical arguments. Instead of distinguishing between the two, they couch them both within the larger Reformed doctrine of sanctification.

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/baptism-holy-spirit/>

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/baptism-of-holy-spirit/>

L3: Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus by Caravaggio. It is such an important painting, that the folks at Khan Academy humanities offer this 5 minute video. It is a unique way to experience art - and perhaps the most important painting of Acts 9 in the entire world. This is an awesome video which will help you see the genius of Caravaggio and the wonder of art to translate a story with near perfection.

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/monarchy-enlightenment/baroque-art1/baroque-italy/v/caravaggio-saul>