

06. 8:1 - 9:31



Acts 8:1

Saul approved of their killing Stephen. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.

We recall Jesus' final words to the apostles: 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8).

To this point we have watched the power of the Holy Spirit working through the apostles and those chosen to assist them in their ministry, as they 'filled Jerusalem' (Acts 5:28) with the word which they proclaimed. We have also witnessed the way in which the religious authorities persecuted the apostles.

With the killing of Stephen the Greek-speaking Christians felt especially vulnerable and dispersed.

Acts 8:2-4

Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison. Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word.

Once again Paul is linked with Stephen. He not only approved of him being stoned (see Acts 8:1), but he is singled out as being determined to wipe out the church which shared Stephen's faith.

The seed of the word is scattered beyond Jerusalem, not because of a decision made by the Jerusalem community, but because of persecution. God's glorifying of the suffering servant continues in Jesus' faithful disciples.

Acts 8:5-7

Philip [Acts 6:5] went down to the city of **Samaria** and proclaimed the **Messiah** to them. The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did, for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed; and many others who were paralysed or lame were cured.
[Luke 6:18]

In the Christian community Judea (Jerusalem) and Samaria, the southern and northern kingdoms, are reconciled. God's chosen people are no longer divided as they had been since the death of Solomon (see 1Kings 12; see also Ezra 4). At last the hope and the promise of Jeremiah is being realised: 'In those days the house of Judah shall join the house of Israel' (Jeremiah 3:18). 'At that time, says the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people' (Jeremiah 31:1). The kingdom is being restored to Israel (see Acts 1:6).

Acts 8:8

So there was great joy in that city.

Philip's word is confirmed by the same wonderful signs that are associated with the ministry of Jesus (see Luke 6:18). The people of Samaria 'did not receive Jesus, because his face was set toward Jerusalem' (Luke 9:53).

Now, however, they welcome Jesus' envoy with 'great joy', like the joy that greeted Jesus' birth (see Luke 1:14,44; 2:10); like the joy that greeted the finding of the lost sheep (Luke 15:6-7), the lost coin (Luke 15:9-10), and the lost son (Luke 15:32); like the joy that welled up in the hearts of Jesus' disciples when the risen Jesus appeared to them (Luke 24:41), and promised to send them the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:52).

Acts 8:9-13

Now a certain man named **Simon** had previously practiced **magic** in the city and amazed the **people of Samaria**, saying that he was someone great. All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, “This man is the power of God that is called Great.” And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised, both men and women. Even **Simon** himself **believed**. After being baptised, he stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place.

Luke wishes to make it perfectly clear that the power that is seen in the ministry of Philip is in no way to be confused with the kinds of power associated with the Samaritan magician, Simon.

Acts 8:14-17

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

‘The initial gift of the Spirit may come without reference to baptism, as in Acts 2:1-4 or, prior to it, as in Acts 10:44-46, while no questions about the Spirit arise when Philip baptises an Ethiopian official in Acts 8:26-39. The Spirit comes at the opportune moment. Behind this literary device is a theological conviction: the wind blows where it wills. No institution or person can manipulate the Spirit of God’ (Hermeneia Commentary by Pervo, page 213)

In his speech on the day of Pentecost, Peter proclaims: ‘Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 2:38).

With baptism comes the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. However, Luke is reminding us that baptism is not an external act which can be controlled in the way that Simon was able to work magic. It is about being welcomed into the community of the Church and discernment on the part of the Church is required. The Jerusalem community send Peter and John to Samaria and the Holy Spirit is received while the apostles pray and lay their hands upon the baptised.

According to the prophet Ezekiel, for God's people to turn away from sin and turn to the Lord, God would need to cleanse them with water and give them his Spirit:

'I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you' (Ezekiel 36:25-27).

The coming of the apostles from Jerusalem and their laying hands upon the recently baptised Samaritans is a statement of the reconciliation of Samaria and Judah. The manifest outpouring of the Holy Spirit in response to prayer is a statement by the risen Jesus that Samaria, like Jerusalem, is where God has chosen to make his dwelling. The Samaritans join the Jews as brothers and sisters, manifesting in their lives the power of the Spirit promised by the Father. Reconciled now with the Jewish Christians as part of a purified, reconciled and united Israel, they are able to carry out the mission of Israel, the mission of Jesus, 'to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8).

Acts 8:18-25

Now when **Simon** saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money! You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God. Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness." Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may happen to me." Now after Peter and John had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, proclaiming the good news to many villages of the Samaritans.

‘The narrative has taught a number of lessons: Christian leaders are not magicians and are not interested in acquiring money, inappropriate desire for which has led to the downfall of Judas (Acts 1:16–20), Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11), and now Simon. Miracle, magic, and money are elements of power. The episode is thus a lesson in the proper use of power. It also affirms that baptism does not preclude apostasy or other failure. Having accomplished all of this, the narrator sends the apostles on their way’ (Pervo page 216).

Acts 8:26-31

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went.

Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

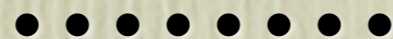
Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it.’ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’

He replied, ‘How can I, unless someone **guides** (ὁδηγεω = ‘odos + ago’) me’. And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

In his Pentecost speech, Peter stated that God's promise of the Holy Spirit 'is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him' (Acts 2:39).

The seven have been preaching the word to the Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem. Philip, having taken the word to Samaria, is now led by 'an Angel of the Lord' and inspired by 'the Spirit' to take it to a Jew from the far away region beyond Egypt who is returning to his country. Israel, now united in the Christian community through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, reaches out through Philip to include all of Israel dispersed throughout the world. The prophecy of Jeremiah is being fulfilled: 'The Lord brought the people of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the lands where he had driven them' (Jeremiah 16:15).

Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: ‘Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.’ [Isaiah 53:7-8] The eunuch asked Philip, ‘About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?’ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptised?’



Some ancient manuscripts, including Irenaeus, AH 3.12.8, add: “And Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may.’ And he replied, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’”

Acts 8:38-40

He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptised him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Having journeyed north to the Samaritans, and having journeyed south to an Ethiopian Jew returning to his country, Philip reaches the coast and the port constructed by Herod the Great and named in honour of the emperor (Caesar) of Rome. Through this port Palestine is connected to the vast Roman Empire in which the word is about to be proclaimed.



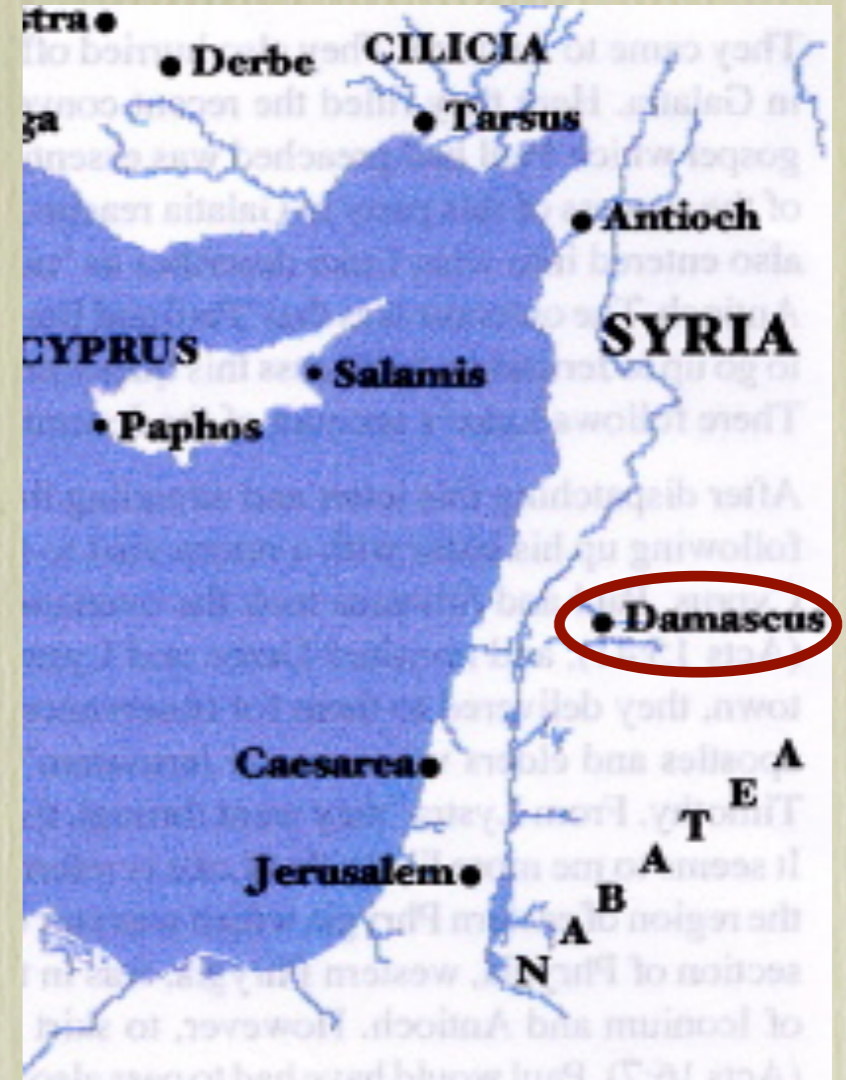
Acts 9:1-2

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, [a Jewish sect that acclaimed Jesus as the Messiah] men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Paul writes that, being more zealous than the others for the traditions of his ancestors, he was ‘violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it’ (Galatians 1:13-14).

‘A persecutor of the church’ (Philippians 3:6).

‘A persecutor, a man of violence’ (1 Timothy 1:13)



Luke has already introduced us to Saul. Those who took part in the stoning of Stephen ‘laid their coats at the feet of a young man (νεανίας, not yet 40) called Saul’ (Acts 7:58) who ‘approved of their killing Stephen’ (Acts 8:1). He also told us that ‘Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison’ (Acts 8:3). The disciples who so enraged Saul are called here those ‘who belonged to the Way.’

The ‘way of the Lord’ (Isaiah 40:3) as lived by Jesus’ followers, described in a summary way in Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35, was sufficiently distinctive to set them apart from their Jewish brothers and sisters.

Luke is about to describe God's mercy to Paul and the call which Paul himself speaks of in his letters:

'God was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles' (Galatians 1:15-16).

'He appeared also to me' (1Corinthians 15:8).

'Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?' (1 Corinthians 9:1).

Acts 9:3-4 : Paul's Enlightenment

Now as Saul was going along and approaching **Damascus**, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'

'Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendour all around. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of someone speaking' (Ezekiel 1:28).



Acts 9:5-6

Saul asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus [ἐγώ εἰμι Ἰησοῦς – Exodus 3:14], whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.'

Like Moses before him (see Exodus 6:9), Saul asks who it is who is calling him. The response includes the divine 'I am' (Exodus 3:14), identified now with Jesus. Saul has met Jesus in Stephen and in those 'who belonged to the Way' (9:2), but he has failed to recognise in them the presence of the Living One, his Lord and Saviour. Like the others who rejected Jesus and were now persecuting Jesus' disciples, Saul was confident that he could see. Now he knows that he is blind and must be led by others. His journey of repentance has begun.

Acts 9:7-9

The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

‘I will lead the blind by a road they do not know ...

Who is blind but my servant?’ (Isaiah 42:16,19)

Acts 9:10-16

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named **Ananias**. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' He answered, 'Here I am, Lord.' The Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.' But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.' But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name **before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel**; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my **name**.'

Acts 9:17-19

So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptised, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. '

Acts 9:20-21

For several days he was with the disciples in **Damascus**, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the **Son of God**' (Acts 1:35; Romans 1:4). All who heard him were amazed and said, 'Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?'

To the Romans Paul introduces himself as: 'a servant of Jesus the Messiah, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God ... the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be **Son of God** with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus the Messiah our Lord' (Romans 1:1-4).

Acts 9:22-25

Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the **Messiah**. After some time had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night so that they might kill him; but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

‘In Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands’ (2 Corinthians 11:32-33).

‘I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus’ (Galatians 1:17).

‘After three years (34-37AD) I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days’ (Galatians 1:18).

Acts 9:26-30

When he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas (see Acts 4:36-37) took him, brought him to the apostles (Cephas and James, the Lord’s brother’, Galatians 1:18-19), and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him. When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Paul speaks **'boldly'**, but not from his own strength:

'By the grace of God I am what I am' (1 Corinthians 15:9).

'I can do all things through him who strengthens me' (Philippians 4:13).

'Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power' (Ephesians 6:10).

'The Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it' (2 Timothy 4:17).

Saul comes up against Greek-speaking Jews, the same people who had martyred Stephen (see 6:9). To save him from the same fate, the community send him off to Tarsus, his city of origin (see 9:11).

37-45AD

‘Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, “The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy” (Galatians 1:21-23).



Acts 9:31

Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up.

Luke first spoke of the Christian community as a ‘church’ (ἐκκλησία) after narrating the sin of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:11). He used the same word to describe the ‘congregation in the wilderness’ at the time of Moses (Acts 7:38). He spoke of the church again when the persecution broke out in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1,3). Stephen declared that it was not for us to build God’s house (see Acts 7:47,49). Here Luke shows us how God, through the Spirit of the glorified Jesus, is building up the church throughout Israel.

Acts 9:31

Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had **peace** and was built up.

The ‘**peace**’ to which Luke refers is not a peace *from* persecution, but a peace in the midst of persecution. It is the Messianic peace for which Zechariah prayed (Luke 1:79), the peace experienced by those who are graced by God (Luke 2:14).

This peace is the fruit of faith (Luke 7:50, 8:48) which is offered by Jesus’ missionaries (Luke 10:5-6), and is the gift of the risen Christ (Luke 24:36).

Acts 9:31

Living in the fear of the Lord and in the consolation of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

The expression ‘the fear of the Lord’ occurs only twice in the New Testament, here and in Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians 5:11. The psalmist identifies those who fear the Lord as those who ‘hope in his love’ (Psalm 33:18). The Book of Proverbs speaks of the fear of the Lord as being the opposite of pride and arrogance (Proverbs 8:13); as consisting in ‘knowledge of the Holy One’ – knowing that God is the creator and sustainer of life, the redeemer and saviour (Proverbs 9:10). Fear of the Lord results in a commitment to seek and to carry out God’s will, knowing that all our hope is in God, the ‘fountain of life’ (Proverbs 14:27). Isaiah speaks of the fear of the Lord as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 11:3), and writes: ‘The fear of the Lord is Zion’s treasure’ (Isaiah 33:6).

The community was living not only in the 'fear of the Lord' but in the 'consolation of the Holy Spirit'. At the beginning of his Gospel, Luke introduced Simeon as a symbol of all who were 'looking forward to the consolation (παράκλησις) of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him' (Luke 2:25). We recall the opening words of the prophet of the exile as he looked forward to the return to the promised land: 'Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God' (Isaiah 40:1). Barnabas, who convinced the community to welcome Paul, was given that name (son of consolation) because he exemplified so well this grace of the Spirit (see Acts 4:36).