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Acts of the Apostles - Lesson 8A

Chapter 8:1-17

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- 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 Romans 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
 - Offenses against the Temple could be punished by death in Israel
 - 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
 - Jews within the city turned on the believing Jews, particularly the Hellenistic Jews, the group to which Stephen belonged
 - 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

- 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
 - 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 Matthew 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
 - 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
 - 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
 - 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
 - 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
 - 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.

- 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
 - 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
 - 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 were 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 Jews who escaped the Assyrian captivity of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and remained in the land
 - 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 Zerubbabel 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 built 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 a 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 the 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 confirmation 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
 - 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
 - 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
 - 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
 - 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
 - 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 to 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 Holy Spirit 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 accepting 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
 - 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
 - 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
- 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 rejected Jesus during the Gospel account
 - After this moment, John is never mentioned again in the book of Acts