

ACTS 8:4-40

TWO DIFFERENT RESPONSES TO THE SAME GOSPEL

It didn't take long for severe persecution to strike the early church. Last time we focused on a sermon preached by a man named Stephen. You all know his story. As it turned out he was killed for the words that he said. The Gospel message is going to be offensive to many who are going to get angry when they are told that they are sinners. That's the first part of the Gospel, what I like to call the "bad news," which is, that we are all sinners. It's not a very popular message. The fact is that most people view themselves as being OK. But the Gospel says otherwise. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." But that leads to the second part of the Gospel message, which is the "good news." You're NOT OK, but THAT'S OK because Jesus can help you. He is the solution to your sin problem. He can save you. He can give your life real meaning. All you have to do is believe in Him, ask Him to save you, and then trust that He will. Sadly, Stephen was killed before he got to that good news. They didn't like what they said, so they killed him. And that makes his death all the more tragic. Those were people he was trying to lead to the LORD.

This morning we'll be looking at two different stories from Acts Chapter 8. Our focus will be on two men, both celebrities in their little corners of the world. As the expression goes they were "big fish in a small pond." One of them I call Simon the Sorcerer (mentioned in scripture as just "Simon"), and then there is the Ethiopian eunuch, a court official. Both of these men hear the same Gospel, but their responses are different. It isn't that one believes and the one doesn't. They both believe but their responses are somewhat different. There are subtle differences in how they responded. The preacher in both cases is a man named Philip. This is not the Apostle Philip. This Philip here will later become known as Philip the Evangelist. We were introduced to him back in Acts Chapter 6.

So, let's pick up the narrative in Acts 8 and verse 4...

READ Acts 8:4

The preaching of the Gospel is taking place despite the increasing persecution. Here we are told that the church is being scattered (because of persecution). The Gospel message is going out beyond the city limits of Jerusalem. It's going out past Jerusalem and past Judea and now we find out it is coming to Samaria.

READ Acts 8:5

This is the same Philip that we were introduced to back in Chapter 6 along with Stephen, one of the seven men "full of the Spirit and wisdom" chosen to serve the church. Do you notice where Philip went? He went to the city of Samaria which is located in the region of Samaria. And what do we know about Samaria? How did the Jewish people – remember most of the early Christians came from a Jewish background – how did they feel about the people who lived in Samaria, the Samaritans? They didn't like them very much. They even avoided going through Samaria. They would completely bypass Samaria. They hated the people of Samaria. There was a prejudice that existed between Jews and Samaritans. The Jews viewed the Samaritans as a mixed race of Jews from the old Northern Kingdom and pagan Gentiles that had been relocated into the region by the Assyrians 750 years before. So, there was intermarriage taking place between the Jews in Samaria and the Gentiles who had settled there.

John Phillips says, "The Jews never accepted [the Samaritans]... They considered them religious and racial mongrels and refused to have anything to do with them... No self-respecting Jew would, of his own preference, go to Samaria.

But Jesus went there, didn't He? And now Philip goes there. Philip actually has great success in this new mission field. No wonder he comes to be known as Philip the Evangelist.

READ Acts 8:6-8

This sounds similar to Jesus and His ministry. Philip's power is lending credibility to the message he is preaching. Where does Philip's power come

from? From the Holy Spirit. Remember, he is a man who is filled with the Spirit.

Verse 8, "there was much joy in that city," (because people were getting saved) reminds me of the old hymn we used to sing back in the old days – "Heaven came down and glory filled my soul!" That is what happens when people get saved. There is this joy that permeates the society wherever that is happening, that community. That's what is going on here.

READ Acts 8:9

Here we are introduced to Simon the Sorcerer. He is the first of the two men we're going to look at. As you can see from this verse he apparently thinks pretty highly of himself. He's a local celebrity.

READ Acts 8:10-11

Simon has quite a following. I see Simon as the David Blane of his day. He amazes the crowds with his magical abilities. But then a new guy comes into town who steals his thunder.

READ Acts 8:12

Simon is no longer the center of attention. Philip is the one out there performing signs and wonders and his preaching is taking everyone by storm. People are being saved right and left.

READ Acts 8:13

Simon believes. He too is baptized as a believer in Jesus. He's caught up in all this excitement of the mighty movement of God taking place there in Samaria. He undoubtedly feels pressure to go along with the other people who are responding to what God is doing. That happens a lot. I've seen this happen at Vacation Bible School and at church camps. Some of the professions of faith are real. God is really doing a work in their lives. But others are there with their friends and they feel coerced due to peer pressure. It is really important for the workers and counselors to get them aside and have them explain the reason they are coming forward.

Simon himself is amazed by the signs and miracles he is seeing. He now realizes there's a power out there that is much bigger than what he has.

Before we go any further, I just want to make an observation about Simon. The question is, "Does Simon really get saved?" This is one of those debates in Christian circles. Personally, I believe the answer is "yes." However, even saved people CAN; truly born-again believers in Jesus Christ CAN have hearts that are NOT right with God. I believe that's the core issue with Simon, as we are about to see.

READ Acts 8:14-17

This is one of those passages that people will point to defend their belief that a person gets filled with the Holy Spirit at some point following their conversion. That is not what we Baptists believe. We believe that when a person gets saved, they receive all of the Holy Spirit that they are going to have. That person gets filled with the Spirit as they yield their lives over to His control. So then, the question that is raised by the Pentecostals and others is, "What then is going on here with these brand-new Samaritan converts?"

John MacArthur in his commentary explains it well. He says, "The laying on of hands signifies apostolic affirmation and solidarity [with these new converts]. The receiving of the Holy Spirit likely manifested itself the same way as it did at Pentecost (Acts 2); as the Gentiles did when they received the Spirit (Acts 10); and as the followers of John [the Baptist] did (Acts 19). As Samaritans, Gentiles and believers from the Old Covenant were added to the church, the unity of the church was established. No longer could one nation (Israel) be God's witness people, but the church was made up of Jews, Gentiles, half-breed Samaritans, and Old Testament saints who became New Testament believers. To demonstrate the unity, it was imperative that there be some replication in each instance of what had occurred at Pentecost with the believing Jews..."

I think that MacArthur offers a reasonable explanation of what is taking place here in Samaria. It's a unique event done for a specific purpose at a certain point in time. We Baptists believe that now when you get saved the Holy Spirit comes to live inside of you. There will be some evidence that a person is filled with the Spirit, that is, when the Holy Spirit has full control of them.

Well old Simon the Sorcerer is really impressed by this...

READ Acts 8:18-19

I don't think Simon quite understands how this works. He is wrongly setting a cash value on spiritual things. All he can see in his brain is dollar signs. He is seeking to make a profit off of the Holy Spirit's power. Peter, never one to mince words, is about to straighten Simon out! He is going to rebuke Simon in the same way that Jesus had rebuked him (many times). Sometimes we need that, don't we?

READ Acts 8:20-21

So then, the root of Simon's problem is misplaced values. He's in love with the things of the world rather than the things of God. His heart is not right. That's what Peter just said. Does this mean that Simon is not really saved. Perhaps. We don't know for sure. My personal observation is that he is saved. I have known a number of saved people who made professions of faith at one point and based on their testimony they had a real encounter with God. But they "backslid" terribly and they weren't living right. I believe it is possible to be a child of God and yet not have your heart right with Him. So, although I cannot stand before you and tell you categorically whether Simon was saved or not. But I CAN tell you with certainty that his heart was NOT right with God. Peter tells Simon what he needs to do to remedy his spiritual problem.

READ Acts 8:22-23

Peter tells Simon that he needs to repent of the evil that is in his heart – his misplaced values – and ask God for forgiveness. This is something

that only Simon himself can do. It's his responsibility to do that. It is up to him to approach the throne of God, to confess his sins and repent. But what does Simon do instead?

READ Acts 8:24

John Phillips in his commentary on this passage made this observation: "Had [Simon] been under genuine conviction, he would NOT have asked Peter to pray for him; he would have prayed for himself. He would have prayed... 'God, be merciful to me a sinner.'" But Simon doesn't appear in this verse to be willing to repent. At least not yet. He only wants to escape the consequence of his sin. That's not necessarily the sign of an unbeliever. As I read this it is more of a sign of an immature believer that doesn't understand.

We never hear from Simon again. We don't know if he ever repented. He was a man who heard the Gospel. He made a profession of faith, supposedly, and was baptized. But it doesn't appear, based on the passage that we just read, to have experienced a real change in his life. Only God knows whether or not Simon was truly saved. I think he was, but just needed to make things right with God. But we don't know. We are left wondering about this guy.

READ Acts 8:25

Peter, John and Philip return to Jerusalem, their home base. On the way back they preach the gospel in various towns. A whole new mission field has been opened in Samaria. The Gospel is spreading. The Great Commission is being fulfilled. That's good!

READ Acts 8:26-27a

Philip the Evangelist is directed by God through an angel (some commentaries speculate that this could have been the Holy Spirit or Jesus Himself or an angel). I personally think it was an angel. Whatever the case, Philip is directed by God through His messenger to go to a specific location. That's all. No other details are given to him. It reminds me of God's call of

Abram in Genesis. No reason for going there is stated. Just GO! And Philip goes. He heads south through the desert toward the Mediterranean coastline.

READ Acts 8:27-28

So out in the middle of nowhere Philip comes across this Ethiopian royal court official sitting in his chariot on the side of the road reading from the book of Isaiah (apparently out loud). As we will see he is reading what we know today as Isaiah Chapter 53, the Suffering Servant passages.

READ Acts 8:29-31

So now it is clear to Philip why God directed him to this desolate place. He has a divine appointment with this man.

READ Acts 8:32-35

This passage out of Isaiah 53 is a particular tough one to understand. It's one that was debated by the Jewish rabbis. Some believed Isaiah was talking about himself. Some believed he was using this imagery to talk about Israel and its sufferings. Still others saw this as a reference to the Messiah although they didn't fully understand it all. Philip knows that this is a prophecy about the coming Messiah who will suffer and die. He points the royal official to Jesus as being the fulfillment of this passage. He also points him to Jesus from many other passages in the Old Testament. He presents the Gospel to this man – "the good news about Jesus."

READ Acts 8:36-37

You'll notice that verse 37 is in brackets. The reason for that is that it was not in the earliest manuscripts. Some translations leave verse 37 out and place it down in the footnotes. The point that's being made here is that when the Ethiopian official hears the good news about Jesus and then he requests to be baptized. But before Philip baptizes him, he makes sure that he has, in fact, placed his faith in Jesus. When the Ethiopian official affirms his belief in Jesus, only then does Philip baptize him.

READ Acts 8:38

One of my former pastors whenever he baptized somebody would close by saying, "Here is water. What prevents you from being baptized?" That was a reference to this passage here. I always thought that was a good way to end baptism.

READ Acts 8:39-40

By the way, v 39 is one of those passages that some Baptists point to in support their position that baptism is by immersion – "when they came up out of the water."

Philip, ever the evangelist continues to tell people about Jesus wherever he goes. We know that he later settles in Caesarea which is along the Mediterranean coast. That is where we are going to see him next, some 20 years later in Acts Chapter 21.

So then, in our first story we were left wondering whether or not Simon the Sorcerer was truly saved or not. But here at the end of our second story the response by this Ethiopian official is different. You might miss it if you read too fast. At the end of verse 39 it says that he "went on his way rejoicing." The last image we have of the Ethiopian official is him in his chariot on his way home rejoicing.

You have two men. Both hear the same Gospel and both apparently believed and were baptized. One man's heart was made right. His life was changed. He went on his way rejoicing. The other man had sin that needed to be dealt with. On the surface he appeared to be the same old person he was before he got saved. Personally, I believe both the men here in Acts Chapter 8 WERE saved. I see them in a broader sense as representative of us as believers at different points in our spiritual journeys. There are times when we are where God wants us to be. We are in His Word on a regular basis. We are doing what God wants us to do. In spite of sometimes unpleasant circumstances, we experience joy in our lives. But there are other times when we allow sin to creep in and, when that happens, we need to deal with it. First John 1:9 says that, if we confess our sins, He

forgives us. But until we do that, we are not going to experience the joy of our salvation. Anyway, that's how I see these two men. I can look back at my own life and see myself in both of these guys.

A few applications from Acts Chapter 8:

- We must obey the promptings of the Holy Spirit (as Philip did). God doesn't always give us a detailed explanation. We just need to act on the information He gives us. We must be willing servants.
- The sincerity of one's faith stands the test of time. As Jesus says in the book of Revelation: "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev 2:10).
- Sometimes we need to be rebuked. God may do that through His Word and by His Spirit. But God also may use human instruments to get His point across. We need to listen.
- It is vitally important for our own spiritual health to deal with any sin in our life. We do this by confessing it to God and then repenting (turning away) from it. This is something we must do ourselves on a regular basis.
- True repentance produces joy – a delight in the LORD.
- Baptism as practiced in the Bible is an act of obedience to be done only after a person professes their faith in Jesus.
- If we are going to grow spiritually, we must continue to be students of the Word, eager to hear from and to know God. We need to be hungry to learn and to grow.