

## LESSON 5: FAITH REQUIRES MUTUAL LOVE

### LESSON AIM

By the end of the lesson, we will: **DEFINE** Christian love and discuss its implications; **REFLECT** on the ways we experience Christian love in our lives; and **PRACTICE** love as it is rooted in our faith in Christ.

### IN FOCUS

Joyce was president of the church's Usher Board. She was always on time, dressed impeccably in the standard black and white uniform with white gloves, and knew all of the hand signals. Whenever Joyce was on duty, the members had their envelopes and fans before they requested them; she would immediately move forward when she heard crying babies—firmly removing them from their parents' arms and delivering them to the nursery so the services could proceed quietly.

As she moved about the sanctuary this morning, Joyce was clearly irritated. She had met with the pastor on Saturday afternoon, and he had been critical of her work. The pastor had complimented Joyce on her faithfulness and dedication. He had even praised her as one of his most reliable members. However, the pastor had gone on to tell her that while it appeared that she enjoyed being an usher, unfortunately, he was concerned that she didn't love the members. Her actions seemed to resemble duty and order more than love and affection, which was not what was best for the congregation.

Nothing can replace our love for others. Working on their behalf is fine, but it is meaningless unless our work is motivated by love. In today's lesson, we will see how Christian love is essential to effective ministry.

### KEEP IN MIND

"But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13, NASB).

### FOCAL VERSES

#### Hebrews 13:1-3 (NASB)

<sup>1</sup> Let love of the brethren continue.

<sup>2</sup> Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.

<sup>3</sup> Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body.

### **1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (NASB)**

<sup>1</sup> If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

<sup>2</sup> If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

<sup>3</sup> And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

<sup>4</sup> Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant,

<sup>5</sup> does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, \

<sup>6</sup> does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth;

<sup>7</sup> bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

<sup>8</sup> Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away.

<sup>9</sup> For we know in part and we prophesy in part;

<sup>10</sup> but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.

<sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.

<sup>12</sup> For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.

<sup>13</sup> But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.

### **THE PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TIMES**

**Corinth.** Located in southern Greece, about 50 miles from Athens, the Corinth of the ancient world was actually a city that had been destroyed by Rome in 146 B.C., and then rebuilt by the emperor, Julius Caesar in 46-45 B.C. A Roman colony, Corinth was the capital of the province of Achaia.

Corinth was socially, culturally, and religiously diverse. In fact, in 49 A.D. a good number of Jews who were expelled from Rome resettled in Corinth. The Christians of Corinth reflected the diversity of the city. Congregations included the wealthy, merchants, enslaved individuals, and those who were formerly enslaved.

Corinth was home to numerous temples dedicated to pagan gods and goddesses including Apollo, Hermes, Isis, Poseidon, and the Pantheon, which is a temple dedicated to all of the gods. When Paul arrived in Corinth (about 50 A.D.) the city's reputation for immorality was widely recognized. The infamous temple of Aphrodite had fallen into ruins but was home to hundreds of "temple prostitutes," making it popular with the numerous sailors visiting the city. The Greek word *korinthiazesthai*, which means to live like a Corinthian, meant that one lived immorally.

### **BACKGROUND**

In Paul's letter to the believers in Corinth, we see the challenges that faced the early church. Corinth was a large metropolis with a diverse population. The house churches that the Corinthian Christians worshiped in reflected the city's diversity. One issue Paul addressed

to the Corinthians was unity among themselves, emphasizing the importance of their relationships with one another.

## **THE WORD MADE SIMPLE**

The Word Made Simple for this week's lesson is love. Love is Agape and it's from 1 Corinthians 13:1. The word is translated charity in the King James Version and means love, fellowship, affection, benevolence, or specifically divine kindness. The Greek word is agape (uh-GAH-pay) and is usually used to refer to an unconditional love that flows from God. This is a love that does not expect anything in return. Agape is the word for God's unconditional love for us. There are three other Greek words for love—philos for brotherly love; storge for family and kinship love; and eros for sexual or sensual love. It's important to remember that God gives us His unconditional love as a model. His love is so transformative, that we can't keep it to ourselves. We share His love with one another as Paul reveals! It's a challenge to love like this, but as we mature in Christ, our ability to love grows, too. We strive to love everyone with an agape love that is enduring and caring regardless of what they offer in exchange. It may feel overwhelming to think about loving the way Christ loves, but because of Jesus, we can love with a love that is patient, kind, just, honest, giving, and enduring. Love. Agape. The word made simple!

## **At-A-Glance**

1. A Plea for Brotherly Love (Hebrews 13:1-3)
2. Love is the Basis of Our Faith (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)
3. Love is the Proof of Our Gifts (vv. 4-7)
4. Love is Permanent (vv. 8-13)

## **In Depth**

### **1. A Plea for Brotherly Love (Hebrews 13:1-3)**

The Scripture opens with "Let brotherly love continue." Our world is full of hurting people, who in turn only know how to hurt other people. As a result, our newspapers and online and TV news reports are full of stories detailing terrible murders and horrific assaults committed by and on people in every age group. Thank God that believers who have found forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ have a new and divine nature. Because of Christ's forgiveness, we are capable of loving others in a deeper and more spiritual way. We are now capable of loving the way that God loves us. However, this capacity to love one another must be exercised. Each day, we have to plead as Jesus did, "nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt" (see Matthew 26:39). It is our love for God that must be the source of our love for others.

We want to remember that verse 1 is not a request nor a mere suggestion. This reminds us that there is a possibility for our love for one another to stop. Two possible reasons are failure to ask for forgiveness when we sin and refusing to forgive someone who hurts us. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught us to ask God to "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12).

Hebrews 13:3 hearkens to customs of the Ancient Near East. In that time, people traveled great distances on foot. It was a common practice for a family to provide a meal and night's lodging to traveling strangers. Our world is very different today, and the expectation to open one's doors to a stranger hardly seems reasonable. We can, however, ask God to provide us with opportunities to assist strangers and share with them. Hospitality is a hallmark of Christianity. We want to show the same grace and kindness toward strangers that God has shown toward us. Jesus taught that, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40).

Hebrews 13:3 offers yet another motivation for our Christian hospitality. The Scripture says that in doing this, we might be visited by an angel. The Old Testament has many accounts of people who were visited by angels of God. However, the word "angel" translated here means a "messenger" and not necessarily a divine creature. While a present-day angel may never actually visit most saints, God's human messengers will most certainly visit us when we express Christian hospitality.

## **2. Love is the Basis of Our Faith (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)**

We want to remember that when Paul wrote this letter, he was keenly aware of the Corinthians' fascination with the gifts of the Spirit. They were attracted to knowledge, prophecy, and speaking in tongues. Paul is teaching that these gifts were meaningless without love. When Paul speaks of "charity" we should read that word as "love." More importantly, we should know that Paul is speaking of a specific form of love. He is not talking about eros, or the sensuous or erotic form of love. Nor is Paul describing philia, which means "a brotherly affection or friendship." Rather, Paul is describing agape, "a commitment of the will to cherish and uphold another person." In the Bible, this is the form of love that is always used when we describe God's love. Agape describes our willful and deliberate decision to treat others with the utmost care and concern and allows us to esteem the best interests of our brother or sister above our own.

We must remember that this form of love is only possible when we love God first. Without this, the love toward one another is a sham, a mere imitation. This prerequisite is demonstrated in the Scripture when we read that there are two great commandments. The first is, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." The second is, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matthew 22:37, 39; Mark 12:30-31; Luke 10:27).

When Paul speaks of "tongues of men and angels," he is not primarily describing glossolalia, or speaking in tongues. Rather, he is saying that it is more important to act lovingly than to be able to speak all the languages of heaven or earth. That definitely includes the conduct of those who practiced glossolalia. Without love, Paul is saying, the ability to communicate is useless. Similarly, Paul tells us that if he was able to explain all the mysteries of the Scriptures, but he wasn't a loving person, it would be meaningless.

## **3. Love is the Proof of Our Gifts (vv. 4-7)**

Contrary to what many of us believe, love is not an ethereal (heavenly) notion. Love is practical and must be put into practice on a daily basis. Christians must constantly measure their love and ask themselves, "Did I show love in that situation or toward that person?"

And, more importantly, “Am I growing?” Paul shows that love can indeed be measured and that love results in characteristics that can be seen and heard.

#### **4. Love is Permanent (vv. 8–13)**

True love will produce patience, kindness, and honesty. As Christians, we have to identify and remove things from our lives that prohibit us from being able to manifest these qualities of love. Paul identifies these hindrances as jealousy, boastfulness, resentment, and ill temperament. He understood that when Jesus returned, sin and death would end. He knew that the gifts of the Spirit would no longer be needed. Paul uses two analogies to support this. First, it would be unimaginable to think that a mature adult would resort to childlike behavior. Secondly, an actual portrayal of a person could never be obtained by looking at a reflection of poor quality. Paul was teaching the Corinthians and us that when Christ returns, Christians would have direct access to Him. Our relationship with Him will be personal and intimate. Paul was trying to dispel the Corinthians' pride in temporary supernatural gifts. Much of Paul's ministry had been spent teaching about the importance of faith and hope. Now, he places love right alongside them, and in fact, elevates love above the others.

#### **SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES**

Read the questions below and type your answers. When you are finished, click the Complete Journal button that appears after the last question.

According to Paul, what is necessary for any service or ministry to be of value (1 Corinthians 13:3)?

After our spiritual gifts cease to exist, what will remain (v. 13)?

#### **DISCUSS THE MEANING**

If all spiritual gifts are predicated on love, why do some workers within the churches seem to believe or behave as though it is not essential to Christian ministry efforts?

#### **LIBERATING LESSON**

Paul makes it clear that for the believer, love is the key. It is love that enables us to reproduce the very character of Jesus Christ in our lives and in our ministry efforts. It is only when we have love that we can access the other fruit of the Spirit. Without love, we cannot genuinely be patient, peaceful, good, gentle, or display any of the other qualities. We may be able to imitate them, but without love, they won't be a part of our character; nor will we be able to fully embrace them in order to do the Kingdom-building work Christ has commissioned us to do.

## **APPLICATION FOR ACTIVATION**

We are often frustrated in our work in churches. Sometimes it feels as though others are not as committed as we are. Over the next week, pray and ask God to reveal to you areas where you may have failed to demonstrate love toward your co-laborers. Then, ask God what you can do to remedy the situation. Also, ask Him how to show love to those who don't show it to you. It may call for you to make apologies and seek forgiveness and forgive others.

## **LESSON 6: STEPHEN'S ARREST AND SPEECH**

### **LESSON AIM**

By the end of the lesson, we will: **DISCUSS** the stand that Stephen took as a response to his faith; **FEEL** motivated to confront principalities and powers of our day; and **SEEK** the power and wisdom of the Spirit in our efforts to speak truth.

### **IN FOCUS**

Cleveland volunteered at the city-run homeless shelter. He was a hard worker with a cheerful attitude. Ms. Martin, the supervisor, was very happy with Cleveland's participation, especially because she seemed short of volunteers.

One day, she overheard Cleveland telling Jesse, a man living at the shelter, that the reason for his joy was Jesus. Jesse asked him how he could get this "Jesus joy."

So Cleveland explained, "First, we tell Jesus that we are sorry for our sins. Then we thank Him for dying on the cross to take the punishment for our sins. And lastly, we ask Jesus to save us." Right then and there, Cleveland and Jesse bowed their heads, and Jesse asked Jesus to save him.

Now Cleveland's joy was so great, he felt like he could walk on air. But just as he was going back to clean up food that a child had dropped, Ms. Martin came up to him with anger written all over her face.

"Cleveland, this is a government-sponsored facility so you cannot come here and talk about your religion!"

How do you think Cleveland will respond to Ms. Martin? What will he say? Have you ever had someone challenge your Christian witness?

Today we will see how Stephen was able to witness with great power and grace.

### **KEEP IN MIND**

“And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts 6:8, NASB).

## **FOCAL VERSES**

### **Acts 6:8-15 (NASB)**

<sup>8</sup> And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.

<sup>9</sup> But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen.

<sup>10</sup> But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

<sup>11</sup> Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."

<sup>12</sup> And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council.

<sup>13</sup> They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law;

<sup>14</sup> for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us."

<sup>15</sup> And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.

### **Acts 7:1-2 (NASB)**

<sup>1</sup> The high priest said, "Are these things so?"

<sup>2</sup> And he said, "Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran,

## **THE PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TIMES**

**Synagogue of the Libertines (Freedmen).** Jews who were born in the Holy Land and spent most of their lives there spoke Aramaic, which was a form of the ancient Hebrew in which our Old Testament is written. But there were other Jews born in other places who had returned to Palestine, and they did not know Aramaic or Hebrew. They only spoke Greek, which was the language of the educated people of the day. Perhaps they had been slaves in other countries, but now they were all proud to be free people. Some of them came from Cyrene, an important city located in what is modern-day Libya in northern Africa. Others came from Alexandria, the chief city of Egypt, and others came from Cilicia and Asia. Ephesus was a grand city located in Asia Minor. Tarsus, where Paul was born, was located in the northern part of Asia Minor in what is now known as Syria.

Pious Greek-speaking Jews attended the Synagogue of Libertines or Freedmen. Paul would have attended this synagogue, and Barnabas probably did also. Among all these Greek-

speaking Jews were a few Christians, but the most outspoken was Stephen. The Holy Spirit spoke through him as he reasoned, discussed, and argued for Jesus Christ.

## **BACKGROUND**

At the beginning of Acts 6, the early Christians were having problems. The Aramaic-speaking Jews were probably attending the big Temple in Jerusalem. But the early Jewish Christians, who spoke Greek, were attending the Synagogue of the Freedmen. The Jews had the wonderful custom of collecting donations for the poor among them; thus, the early Christians followed this custom and gave to needy widows. (Widows in those days had few ways to raise money to feed themselves, much less their children if they had any.)

The apostles were among the Aramaic Jews and were the early Christian leaders. They were in charge of the distribution of gifts to the widows, yet they were forgetting the Greek-speaking Christian widows. This could have been because of snobbery, because of language differences or because they just overlooked the Greek-speaking poor.

The godly solution of the apostles was to appoint Greek-speaking Jewish Christians to take charge of distributing food and money to the widows and other poor among them. The Greek-speaking Christians would know who was in need. The seven men chosen for this task were also chosen for their outstanding spirituality. Among them were Philip and Stephen, who is the focus of today's lesson

## **THE WORD MADE SIMPLE**

The Word Made Simple for this week's lesson is blaspheme. This word is known by many believers as the crime or sin of which Jesus, the apostles, and the early church were often accused. Today's scripture from Acts 6:11 is no exception. The Greek word is "blasphemos" and means to act or speak against God and God's character. During the time of the events of the book of Acts, popular teaching and religious law instructed that blasphemy was to speak against God, the Temple in Jerusalem, which was seen as God's throne, and the authoritative interpretations of the Law of Moses. For Jesus to claim that He was the Messiah, which made Him the authoritative interpreter of the Law and Mediator of God's presence, was seen as blasphemy. Either Jesus was truly the Messiah or the greatest blasphemer the religious leaders could imagine. As believers, we know that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God. The disciples believed in Him and proclaimed the truth about Him and were also called blasphemers because of it. One of the ten commandments, which is often overlooked, is not to blaspheme. "Do not take the name of Lord in vain," or do not talk about God out of God's character or without the deepest reverence.

Unfortunately, some of our modern curse phrases are blasphemies because they use God's name to swear. But Stephen was not blaspheming. He was saying the truth even though it was rejected. Because of his boldness, he was called a blasphemer when he was actually one of the greatest evangelists who would become the first martyr of the church.

Blaspheme. Blasphemos. The word made simple!

## **AT-A-GLANCE**

1. Introduction of Stephen (Acts 6:8–10)
2. Opposition to Stephen (vv. 11–14)
3. Stephen's Effect on the Sanhedrin (vv. 15–7:2a)

## **IN DEPTH**

### **1. INTRODUCTION OF STEPHEN (ACTS 6:8–10)**

Stephen did much more than hand out gifts to the needy. Until this time, Scripture had only mentioned the apostles performing miracles, but now we see Stephen doing great wonders. (We'll read later of the miracles that Philip performed). Scripture tells us the reason for Stephen's ability to perform miracles is that he is full of grace and power. We would expect to hear about the power in conjunction with miracles, but maybe we are surprised by the accompaniment of grace. Grace is always an unmerited gift of God. Therefore, we see that God working through Stephen, not because Stephen is so wonderful, but because God is wonderful and empowered him to do these amazing things.

At this time, all Christians were converted Jews and all attended synagogues. The Christian Jews were a tiny minority among the other Jews. The Jews whose primary language was Greek attended the Synagogue of the Freedmen. As Stephen, who attended this synagogue, performed miracles in the name of Jesus, other Jewish members who did not follow Christ opposed. They debated with Stephen, but their arguments did not stand up against him for two reasons. First of all, the Holy Spirit was enabling him to use great wisdom. Secondly, the things that Stephen said concerning Jesus Christ were true.

### **2. OPPOSITION TO STEPHEN (VV. 11–14)**

Those who opposed Stephen thought they were defending things that good Jews believed, but they were probably jealous of him as well. Obviously, Stephen garnered a lot of attention from the miracles he performed and his brilliant exposition of the true meaning of Old Testament Scriptures.

Opposition spread from the Synagogue of the Freedmen to the great temple in Jerusalem and to the influential Jews who had also opposed Jesus. As a result, they seized Stephen and brought him before the great Jewish religious council, the Sanhedrin. This was the same religious council that put Jesus on trial. As they had with Jesus, they also brought false witnesses against Stephen and used some of the same arguments. They accused Stephen of speaking against the Temple in Jerusalem. They said the Jesus he preached about had threatened to destroy the Temple. In John 2:19, Jesus said that if they destroyed "this temple," meaning His body, He would raise it again in three days. We know that they were twisting the words of both Jesus and Stephen without really trying to understand the message.

In addition, they accused both Stephen and Jesus of trying to destroy the Old Testament Law, again twisting their words. Jesus said He came not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). And because they were accusing Stephen of speaking about the Temple and the Law, they were in essence accusing him of speaking against God.

### **3. STEPHEN'S EFFECT ON THE SANHEDRIN (VV. 15-7:2A)**

When Stephen's accusers finished what they had to say, they noticed his face looked like that of an angel. We are sure this does not mean he resembled the childlike pictures of angels we often see portrayed nor is it likely that he looked like some type of avenging angel. But because we have never looked into the face of an angel, we can only imagine a face that reflected the holiness of God Himself.

At that point, the high priest asked Stephen whether the charges of his accusers were true. This was probably Caiaphas, the very same man who had presided over the trial of Jesus. But that did not scare Stephen, who then launched into a history of the Jewish people, including their rejection of the prophets that God sent and finally the crucifixion of their Savior. The result of Stephen's sermon was that he was stoned and received by Jesus into heaven.

### **SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES**

How did Stephen communicate the Gospel to people (Acts 6:8-10)?

What did the false witnesses testify that Stephen said (v. 14)?

As the council looked upon Stephen's face, what did they see (v. 15)?

### **DISCUSS THE MEANING**

Stephen was mighty in both miracles and words. Do you think you must have these abilities to witness to others about Jesus Christ? What are the characteristics we need to witness effectively concerning Jesus?

### **LIBERATING LESSON**

In the days of Stephen, Jewish society was very religious. Christians retained some of the good things from the religious Jews, such as collecting contributions for the poor, and thus the Christians made regular gifts to the widows, the most vulnerable in their society. Unlike the context of Stephen's ministry, our society today is continuing to become increasingly secular. But even though the people of Stephen's day were very religious, they were extremely hostile to the Good News of Jesus Christ. In our society, people are seemingly becoming more hostile to the Jesus of the Bible. What are some of the things that evoke hostility to the Christian message today? How do these things compare to the type of hostility in Stephen's day? What are some ways we can reverse this trend? Stephen, the other deacons, and the apostles demonstrated the love of Christ in the things they did for the poor. How can similar programs help prepare the way for our Christian witness?

## **APPLICATION FOR ACTIVATION**

What are some situations when you think you could be a witness to the message of Jesus Christ? What are some of the things keeping you from speaking out? Ask God to empower you to tell people about our Lord. Ask Him to give you wisdom for the things to say and do. Before you speak up for Christ, demonstrate your love for others in the things you do.

## **LESSON 7: STEPHEN'S MARTYRDOM**

### **LESSON AIM**

By the end of the lesson, we will: **IDENTIFY** the reasons for Stephen's martyrdom, **REFLECT** on our reactions when our beliefs are challenged, and **WITNESS** peacefully and candidly for Christ regardless of the cost.

### **IN FOCUS**

This was Angie's first time meeting Joanne, the woman who would soon become her mother-in-law. They were both shocked to realize that they taught at the same elementary school. The meeting, however, was not off to a great start. "Well, Angie," Joanne said, "I've heard that you are one of those 'shoutin' type of Christians. Is that true?" In a way, it seemed like a trap, but Angie realized it was an opportunity from God.

"I don't know what you mean by 'shoutin', but I am enthusiastic about Jesus because He is my Savior and I love Him," replied Angie. She could see the distaste for her answer all over her future mother-in-law's face.

Angie was glad for the opportunity to witness, but she knew that not all of these opportunities lead to a happy ending. And this time, it didn't.

"I'm glad you talked to Mom about your relationship with Jesus," her fiancé, Anthony, said to her later, "though I knew what her response would be."

Although Angie saw Joanne at school almost every day, she did not speak to Angie or Anthony for months. It hurt them both that she did not even come to their wedding.

Sometimes, even a life full of goodness and a very wise witness will not convince people. Are we ready to speak up for our Savior, no matter what the consequences will be in our lives?

### **KEEP IN MIND**

#### **Acts 7:59 (NASB)**

<sup>59</sup> They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"

## FOCAL VERSES

### Acts 7:51-60 (NASB)

<sup>51</sup> "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did.

<sup>52</sup> "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become;

<sup>53</sup> you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

<sup>54</sup> Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him.

<sup>55</sup> But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God;

<sup>56</sup> and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

<sup>57</sup> But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse.

<sup>58</sup> When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

<sup>59</sup> They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"

<sup>60</sup> Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.

### Acts 8:1 (NASB)

<sup>1</sup> 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.

## THE PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TIMES

**Blasphemy.** The Greek word for "blasphemy" means "to slander" or "to speak lightly of the divine." In the New Testament, blasphemy indicated a hostile attitude toward God. In the epistle to the Romans, Paul quotes Isaiah who stated that God's name was blasphemed among the Gentiles because of the Jews (Romans 2:24, Isaiah 52:5). This confirms the importance of believers living in ways that bring praise to God rather than contempt for Him. It is worth noting that both Jesus and Stephen were condemned to death under the false charge of blasphemy. This occurred because Jesus claimed the prerogatives that belong to God alone, and Stephen accused the unbelieving Jews of murdering the long-awaited Messiah.

## BACKGROUND

Jesus knew that the Gospel of the Kingdom would be preached to all nations. He knew that truth, armed with the omnipotence of the Holy Spirit, would prevail in the battle with evil and that the bloodstained banner would one day wave triumphantly over His followers.

As Christ's earthly ministry drew to a close, He knew He would soon leave His disciples to carry on the work without His personal supervision. He sought to encourage them and to prepare them for the future. He did not deceive them with false hopes. He knew He was about to be separated from them—to leave them as sheep among wolves. He knew they would suffer persecution, be cast out of the synagogues, and be thrown into prison for proclaiming Him as the Messiah. In speaking of their future, Jesus said some of them would be killed. He knew that in their coming trials they would remember His words and be strengthened to believe in Him as the Redeemer.

Are you prepared to stand up for your faith, regardless of the consequences as demonstrated by Stephen in today's lesson?

## **THE WORD MADE SIMPLE**

The Word Made Simple for this week's lesson is witness. The word means to tell the truth about what is known or seen. The Greek word is *martureos* (mar-too-REH-os), which means to give earnest testimony or evidence about something. The witnesses against Stephen were false; they claimed they had heard and seen him blaspheme, which according to the Law of Moses, could result in the punishment of stoning. We have probably heard the scripture, "out of the mouth of two or three witnesses, it shall be established." This is to quote the legal standard for conviction of a crime from Deuteronomy 19:15, which Paul employs in 2 Corinthians 13:1 to rebuke the church at Corinth for their sins. But Stephen was a bold witness for Christ, sharing what he had seen and heard about God's power in His name and evidence that Jesus was the Messiah. For us, it means that we, too, must testify. We must be sincere witnesses of Jesus Christ's power in our lives by sharing the good news of how Jesus has transformed our lives so that others may know Him as well! Witness. Martuero. The Word Made Simple.

## **AT-A-GLANCE**

1. The Conclusion of Stephen's Defense (Acts 7:51–53)
2. The Death of Stephen (vv. 53–8:1a)

## **IN DEPTH**

### **1. THE CONCLUSION OF STEPHEN'S DEFENSE (ACTS 7:51–53)**

The beginning of chapter 7 opens with Stephen's brilliant defense of what he believed, which was really a review of the history of the people of Israel. He begins by appealing to the memory of Abraham. He describes Abraham as a man of longtime faith who dared to change his life in obedience to God, leaving his country and even his father's house to go

into a land he had never seen before. Though he was old and childless, Abram (renamed Abraham) believed God would give him descendants.

The next man on Stephen's list was Joseph. Joseph was a man of faith who obeyed God and had every one of God's promises to him fulfilled. Stephen contrasts Joseph with members of the Sanhedrin, who refused to obey God because they feared the changes that doing so would bring in their lives and in their levels of affluence. Next, Stephen spoke of Moses, whom they had accused him of blaspheming. Stephen argued that Moses failed when he acted according to what seemed right in his own eyes and according to his own wisdom. But when God appeared, then instructed and empowered him, Moses went back to Egypt and became a ruler and deliverer. He answers their charge by quoting Moses himself: "God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among your own people" (Acts 7:37, NLT; see Deuteronomy 18:15). In other words, Moses himself had said things would change. God was going to raise up another prophet who, like Moses, would teach the people a whole new way of life in God. The prophet whom Moses spoke of was Jesus, the man they had put to death and were now rejecting.

Stephen answered the second charge regarding the Temple by quoting from Isaiah: "Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest? Hath not my hand made all these things?" (Acts 7:49–50, KJV; see Isaiah 66:1–2). No building can contain God. God is the Creator of all things.

After answering their charges, Stephen levels a charge of his own: "You stubborn people! You are heathen at heart and deaf to the truth. Must you forever resist the Holy Spirit? That's what your ancestors did, and so do you!" (Acts 7:51, NLT). These Jews were stubborn—they would not bow to God's will. They had what the KJV refers to as "uncircumcised hearts," meaning their hearts were insensitive to the grace and glory of God. They refused to repent. Just as their forefathers had persecuted and murdered the prophets who prophesied of Jesus, these Jews had betrayed and murdered the Christ.

## **2. THE DEATH OF STEPHEN (VV. 53–8:1A)**

Stephen's accusers and the religious leaders were so outraged by this truth that they could not stand it. "The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen's accusation, and they shook their fists at him in rage" (Acts 7:54, NLT). In contrast to his accusers, who were driven wild by their passions, Stephen continued to look to God: "But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God's right hand" (v. 55, NLT). These words are almost identical to the words Jesus had spoken to these men just a few years earlier: "You have said it. And in the future you will see the Son of Man seated in the place of power at God's right hand" (Matthew 26:64, NLT). When they heard this, they knew the issue was not Stephen but Jesus.

They had brought Stephen to trial, and he condemned them with the very Scriptures they professed to believe. Like the men of the synagogue, they could not argue with his

testimony. Consequently, these enraged Jews cried out at the top of their voices and put their hands up to their ears in a vain attempt to drown out Stephen. When confronted with the truth of Christ, one must either submit or resist. The Jewish leaders and Stephen's accusers decided to resist. Like their forefathers, instead of heeding the words of God's prophet, they would kill him. The respectable Sanhedrin turned into an unruly mob, rushed at Stephen, and dragged him outside the city gates. They threw him down into a pit and stoned him.

The reference to the "witness" (Acts 7:58, KJV) suggests that the stoning was carried out as a legal execution. The penalty for blasphemy was stoning (Leviticus 24:16). According to Jewish Law, the witnesses would have to throw the first stones (Deuteronomy 17:7). Acts 7:58 says that these men took off their outer cloaks and laid them at the feet of a young Jewish Pharisee named Saul.

After the witnesses had thrown the first stones, the rest of the congregation picked up stones and hurled them at Stephen. If someone had a good aim and managed to hit Stephen in the head early on, he would lose consciousness and would not have to endure the prolonged agony. If not, his death would be long, slow, and very painful.

As the malicious and unforgiving crowd threw their stones down on Stephen, he first cried out in prayer for God to receive his spirit. Then, he dropped to his knees and uttered his final words, "Lord, don't charge them with this sin!" (Acts 7:60, NLT). Stephen, the first recorded Christian martyr, died at the hands of the same people who had delivered Jesus to be crucified, and he died with a similar prayer on his lips.

The King James Version translates that Stephen "fell asleep" (Acts 7:60; also see John 11:11). Because physical death is temporary for the believer, death is referred to as sleep. The body sleeps, but the spirit goes to be with the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). God never wastes the blood of His saints. The persecution that began with Stephen's murder forced many in the Church to flee Jerusalem and take the Gospel to the furthest parts of the then-known world. And a young man named Saul, who gave his approval to the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1), was so moved by Stephen's death that he never forgot it. Although Saul would become the greatest persecutor of the early Church, Stephen's death would always remain in his mind. There is little doubt that the Holy Spirit used Stephen's message and glorious death to prepare Saul for his meeting with the risen Lord on the Damascus Road (Acts 9). Saul, later called Paul, would become the single greatest evangelist the world has ever known.

Stories of martyrdom are continually written today with tales of others who are called to lay down their lives for Jesus' sake.

## **SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES**

What physical response did the Jews make that demonstrated their passionate anger with Stephen (Acts 7:54)?

How does Luke describe the final moments of Stephen's life (v. 60)?

Discuss the Meaning

After studying the life of Stephen, how do you view the responsibilities of deacons and whether their duties begin and end with the business of the local church?

## **LIBERATING LESSON**

Stephen is recorded as the first person to give his life to spread the Gospel. He was known as an outspoken leader and a man of great faith. He refused to compromise his beliefs and virtually spoke his own death sentence. In today's society, every day we are faced with issues that may compromise our Christian beliefs. The challenge for many Christians lies in whether we are willing to suffer persecution despite what others may think. Are we willing to stand on God's Word when it is not popular? Like Stephen, we as Christians must decide that regardless of what Satan brings against us, we will tenaciously stand on the Word of God.

## **APPLICATION FOR ACTIVATION**

Stephen was willing to die for the cause of Christ. Maybe God has not called you to make this kind of sacrifice, but Christianity does require something from all of us. Look for ways to make sacrifices to God for the sake of the Gospel. This sacrifice can be time, money, or whatever you choose. Prepare to share your experiences next week.

## **WEEK 8: SIMON WANTS TO BUY POWER**

### **LESSON AIM**

By the end of the lesson, we will: **DISCUSS** Simon's motivation to receive the Holy Spirit; **REFLECT** on any selfish desires for God's power; and **CREATE** a list of true and sincere motives for following Christ.

### **IN FOCUS**

Although it was not really much of a sacrifice from his salary as a successful corporate lawyer, Robert Jones put large amounts of money in the offering. He had been attending church and placing his money in the offering tray for missions every 1st Sunday of the month for years. When it was time to elect members to the various church committees, Mr. Jones thought he would easily be elected to his favorite committee: missions. After all, he gave plenty of money to this cause and everyone seemed to know it. But instead of electing Mr. Jones, the people of his church voted for Warren, a humble man who had already gone on a number of missions trips, including one where he dug up septic systems. Mr. Jones was furious and thought, 'Don't these people know how much I am giving to the church, especially to the missions' ministry? What can Warren possibly give that I can't?'

What do you think is Mr. Jones' motivation for running for leader of the missions committee? Why do you think the people did not vote for him? Do churches ever favor the wealthy people in the congregation? Can money buy a person's way into church power? In today's lesson, we will see how consequences come from thinking money can buy everything, especially the Holy Spirit.

### **KEEP IN MIND**

"Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money" (Acts 18:18, NASB).

### **FOCAL VERSES**

#### **Acts 8:9-24 (NASB)**

<sup>9</sup> 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;

<sup>10</sup> and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, "This man is

what is called the Great Power of God."

<sup>11</sup> And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John,

<sup>15</sup> who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit.

<sup>16</sup> For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

<sup>17</sup> Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.

<sup>18</sup> Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money,

<sup>19</sup> saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

<sup>20</sup> But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!

<sup>21</sup> "You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.

<sup>22</sup> "Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you.

<sup>23</sup> "For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity."

<sup>24</sup> But Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

## **THE PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TIMES**

**Sorcery.** In Unger's Bible Dictionary, sorcery is defined as "the practice of the occult arts under the power of evil spirits or demons and has been common in all ages of the world's history" (1039). In this country, we are more familiar with a type of magic that is simply sleight of hand, using such tricks as hiding cards up the sleeve or drawing attention away from the hand doing the trick. But there is another magic that is drawn from the power of evil spirits. For example, the practitioner may actually do things that are not within the realm of the everyday laws of physics.

In today's Scripture, we will be reading about Simon the sorcerer, who called upon these occult arts to do such wonders that people held him in great awe. Simon took upon himself the title of "the great one."

In many traditional cultures in Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Europe, sorcerers scare people. If people do not sacrifice chickens and other animals and items, the sorcerer invokes fear that evil spirits might hurt them. And all along, the sorcerer is getting rich from the sacrifices. All through the Bible, magical arts are condemned because of their

connection with evil spirits and because they lead people to do terrible things out of fear, including sacrificing their own children.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Book of Acts is a book of history and faith. In addition to providing a transition between the Gospels and the Epistles, Luke, the writer of Acts gives us the vital historical facts of how Christianity began and spread. In Acts, selected events in church history are recorded that demonstrate Christian doctrine and practice. Clearly, it is through the power of the Holy Spirit that the men and women of God are able to testify that Jesus is the Christ. There is great emphasis on the connection between the Old Testament, the Jews, and Christianity. There is an even greater emphasis that salvation is not bound by a believer's race or ethnicity; rather, it is extended to all humankind. In Acts, it is clear that it is only Jesus, the Christ, who is able to fulfill the needs of the Gentiles and the Jews.

## **THE WORD MADE SIMPLE**

The Word Made Simple for this week's lesson is sorcery from Acts 8:9. The Greek word is *mageon* (ma-GYEOH-on), and it means magic. The meaning is straightforward and translates into our language today. Simon the Magician performed charms and used magic in order to build a reputation and draw a crowd. The word used is different than the word used for witchcraft in Galatians or Revelation. It is not clear exactly what Simon was doing, but he was using spells of some sort employing a false power, natural power, or trickery that crowds watching him found amazing. This magic was no match for the power of the Holy Spirit. This is what the disciples showed as they healed the sick, cast out demons, and performed miracles in the name of Jesus Christ. Simon's magic was powerless tricks that brought attention to himself. The apostles' miracles were powerful demonstrations that drew people to God. Let us be discerning as believers to not be amazed by the tricks of humans. Only value the truth and the wonder-working power of God through the Holy Spirit. Sorcery. Mageuon. The word made simple!

## **AT-A-GLANCE**

1. Introducing Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8:9–11)
2. Many Turn to Christ (vv. 12–13)
3. The Believers Receive the Holy Spirit (vv. 14–17)
4. Simon Attempts to Buy the Power of the Holy Spirit (vv. 18–24)

## **In Depth**

### **1. INTRODUCING SIMON THE SORCERER (ACTS 8:9–11)**

Today's Scripture passage begins in the midst of a great evangelistic campaign in Samaria. After the stoning of Stephen, believers, except for the apostles, scattered everywhere while spreading the Gospel. Philip, one of the deacons who was appointed along with Stephen, went to Samaria and began preaching and performing miraculous signs. Because of his witness, many came to Christ. Simon the sorcerer was among the Samaritans who heard Philip's preaching and saw the accompanying signs and wonders. Simon had enjoyed tremendous popularity among the Samaritans. Scripture tells us that Simon had been practicing the magical arts and had deceived many with his false claims of greatness. Simon's abilities as a magician had "bewitched the people" (Acts 8:9, KJV).

Even today, people mistakenly believe that the only difference between magic and miracles is that the latter is more impressive and is practiced by Christians. The truth is far more important. Miracles clearly point to God, while magic manipulates and points away from God. Faith comes through hearing the Word and not through seeing miracles.

## **2. MANY TURN TO CHRIST (VV. 12–13)**

The Samaritans had previously believed in Simon because of his magic. They had no faith in Simon; rather, their belief was predicated on his magical abilities. Through the preaching of Philip, the faith of the Samaritans was based on the Good News of Jesus, the Christ, and the kingdom of God. The Samaritans saw Philip's miracles as confirmation of the truth of the resurrection of Christ. The miracles aided— not caused—their faith. Now that faith in Jesus was the basis of their belief, they turned away from Simon. Even Simon himself believed and was baptized.

## **3. THE BELIEVERS RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT (VV. 14–17)**

When news of Philip's successful ministry in Samaria reached Jerusalem, the apostles immediately dispatched Peter and John to Samaria. That these two elder statesmen were sent to Samaria should not be misread. There was no lack of faith on the part of the church in Philip's ability to preach salvation. This fact is apparent when we see that Peter and John did not preach in Samaria.

Instead, they prayed and laid hands on the Samaritan converts. As a result, God gave the Samaritans the gift of the Holy Spirit. The sending of Peter and John is better understood in light of who the Samaritans were. They were a mixed-race people with some Jewish lineage but possessed an alternative style of worship. They shared some of the same beliefs as the Jews: They claimed an Abrahamic lineage and they were also awaiting a Messiah. By sending Peter and John, the church in Jerusalem was affirming its unity with the emerging church in Samaria. The impartation of the Holy Spirit ensured the unity of the church. The Holy Spirit also provided a witness in the form of the apostles Peter and John. The apostles were credible and authoritative witnesses to the Jews that the acceptance of Samaritans into the church was equal to that of the Jews.

The fact that the apostles “laid their hands” on the Samaritan converts is no evidence that this was the only way for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17). On the Day of Pentecost, there was no mention of laying on of hands, yet the Holy Spirit was imparted to all of the disciples who were present and believing. Additionally, when Peter preached to Cornelius’ household, there is no mention of laying on of hands to receive the Spirit (Acts 10:44).

There is also little scriptural evidence that the twelve apostles were the only men empowered to impart the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands. When Paul, formerly Saul of Tarsus, was converted, it was Ananias who laid hands on him so that Paul might be healed and receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17–18). Ananias was neither an apostle nor a deacon. Instead, the laying on of hands and the receipt of the Holy Spirit by the Samaritans at the hands of the apostles marked a critical breakdown of religious and racial barriers. Philip had already baptized the believing Samaritans; thus, they were already saved. The apostles now witnessed the inclusiveness of the church. They saw that God was giving these Samaritans the exact same gift of the Holy Spirit that He had given to the apostles and disciples in Jerusalem. There was no barrier between the believing Jews and the believing Samaritans. There was one faith, one baptism, and one Spirit (see Ephesians 4:4–6).

#### **4. SIMON ATTEMPTS TO BUY THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT (VV. 18–24)**

Superstitious Simon wanted to be able to impress people again with his magical powers, but he did not understand that the gift of the Holy Spirit is freely given to all who believe. Earlier, we read that Simon believed and was baptized. At this point, we wonder whether his profession of faith was genuine. When Simon saw Peter and John laying hands on people to receive the Holy Spirit, he wanted this same power for himself, and he was ready to pay for it.

Peter saw through Simon right away. This was definitely not a genuine desire for spiritual power. In his heart was a desire to have center stage, and this is the opposite of what God desires to see in us. God wants us to give Him preeminence. Many people today are confused about paying for spiritual blessings. God is not like the waiter who gives you better service if you tip better. Even our good works will not open the door of heaven for us. In Ephesians 2:8–9 (KJV), we read: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.” Every gift we receive from God is just that—a gift! Even our spiritual gifts are free from our heavenly Father (Ephesians 4:7–13).

We would like to see a happy ending to this story recorded in Acts 8, but it’s not there. Instead of Simon praying to God in deep repentance, he asked Peter to pray for him that the punishment for his sins would not fall on him. In other words, Simon was not sorry for his sins; he just wanted to get off the hook from the punishment.

#### **SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES**

What was Simon doing to amaze the people of Samaria (Acts 8:9)?

How did the Samaritans respond to Philip (v. 12)?

What terrible thing did Simon try to do (vv. 18–19)?

## **DISCUSS THE MEANING**

Peter gave Simon a warning. Why do you think what Simon did was so terrible?

Name some other times when the Holy Spirit was given through the laying on of hands. What are some similarities in these cases? What are some differences?

## **LIBERATING LESSON**

Simon reminds us of some preachers who seem to be in the ministry primarily for fame and fortune. What are some signs of authenticity or insincerity you can see in some preachers?

## **APPLICATION FOR ACTIVATION**

It may be easier to see false motivations in others than ourselves. Finish today's lesson by creating as a list of true and sincere motives for following Christ. Now examine your heart to see how you measure up, and then ask God to help form your attitudes and motives to be true and sincere.

## **LESSON 9: PHILIP AND THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH**

### **LESSON AIM**

By the end of the lesson, we will: **EXPLAIN** the connection between Philip's sharing of the Gospel and its universal availability; **REFLECT** on our openness to people who differ from us; and **DEVELOP** strategies to make our churches more open and inclusive.

### **IN FOCUS**

Michelle loved meeting with her Bible study small group but lately she felt unsettled. The group had met faithfully for about five years and studied the Bible along with other Christian books that helped them apply God's word to their daily lives. She was so grateful for the group and how it helped her grow in her faith, but now she felt God calling her to other things.

"I want to take all that I've learned and share it with others around the world, you know – missions," she said to her small group leader one day after the group meeting. The following Sunday at church, her small group leader introduced her to the leader of the Missions Ministry, and she began to go out with the group to share the Word of God and serve those in need.

In our lesson this week, we will explore how Philip used the Scriptures to explain salvation to the Ethiopian eunuch.

### **KEEP IN MIND**

"As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch \*said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" (Acts 9:36, NASB).

### **FOCAL VERSES**

#### **ACTS 8:26-39 (NASB)**

<sup>26</sup> But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, "Get up and go south to the road that

descends from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert road.)

<sup>27</sup> So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship,

<sup>28</sup> and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah.

<sup>29</sup> Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot."

<sup>30</sup> Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

<sup>31</sup> And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

<sup>32</sup> Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: "HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER; AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT, SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH.

<sup>33</sup> "IN HUMILIATION HIS JUDGMENT WAS TAKEN AWAY; WHO WILL RELATE HIS GENERATION? FOR HIS LIFE IS REMOVED FROM THE EARTH."

<sup>34</sup> The eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?"

<sup>35</sup> Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.

<sup>36</sup> As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch \*said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?"

<sup>37</sup> [And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."]

<sup>38</sup> And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him.

<sup>39</sup> When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing.

## **THE PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TIMES**

**Eunuchs.** Throughout the Bible, there are references to royal attendants appointed by kings as official caretakers of queens, harems, and women (Esther 2:3, 12–15). Those eunuchs, who served with distinction, were able to rise in rank within the royal households. The Assyrians and the pharaohs of Egypt were known to have minor officials in their court who often served as trustees of the royal assets. While the term is often literal, referring to men who have been physically castrated, this was not always the case. The term "eunuchs" was also used to denote officials who were assigned to duties in the courts of kings. Because the Ethiopian man referenced in today's lesson was a proselyte, or Gentile who has converted to Judaism, to the Jewish religion, we may deduce that he was not castrated because the Mosaic Law would not have allowed him to become a part of the congregation of God's people (Deuteronomy 23:1).

## **BACKGROUND**

In the Book of Acts, the story of Philip's evangelistic effort serves as a transition between the ministries of Peter and Paul. The account of Paul describes how God adds to the church through his bold and relentless preaching. Philip is in the middle of the record of these two great statesmen; Philip's efforts add to the church soul by soul.

We see Philip first serving as an elected deacon in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:5). His effective witnessing efforts are described in Acts 8:4–25, which shows how they fulfill Jesus' Great Commission to spread the Gospel from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth.

## **THE WORD MADE SIMPLE**

The Word Made Simple for this week's lesson is eunuch. This is a difficult word for us to talk about or explore, but it is an important word for us to examine because of our scripture from Acts 8:26–39. The word eunuch is a Greek word, so its translation is the same. The word is used to refer to a man who has usually been castrated so he can serve as a high-ranking government official. Eunuchs lived with great shame and also great power because of their state. The goal was to keep the men from being sexually engaged with powerful women such as queens, princesses, or court maidens. Also, emasculating the men assured that they would stay focused on their service to the royal family rather than being concerned about their own families. The man in Acts was a eunuch who was the equivalent of the Treasurer of Ethiopia serving Queen Candace. This powerful official would not have been allowed to enter the Jewish Temple because he was considered ritually unclean. But he went to Jerusalem to learn and worship around the Temple mount or perhaps to bring offerings from those he served. Generations ago, Isaiah prophesied that one day, eunuchs would be able to worship God freely with the rest of the Israelites and Gentiles. This African man with great power and real limitations may have had Jewish ancestry, or perhaps he converted to Judaism. In any case, he was studying Isaiah, and Philip shared the Gospel with him, which ended up not only leading to his conversion but also the taking of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the nation of Ethiopia. Eunuch. The word made simple!

## **AT-A-GLANCE**

1. Philip Obeys the Spirit (Acts 8:26–29)
2. Philip Witnesses in the Spirit (vv. 29–35)
3. The Ethiopian Confesses Christ (vv. 36–39)

## **IN DEPTH**

### **1. PHILIP OBEYS THE SPIRIT (ACTS 8:26–29)**

Acts 8 focuses on two great missionary efforts by Philip. In the first, Philip, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, has preached Christ, which led to the conversion of the

Samaritans. The receipt of the Holy Spirit by the Samaritans verifies his success with spreading the Good News from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria.

The Spirit then directs Philip on another mission. We are told that an angel of the Lord directs Philip to go down from Jerusalem to Gaza (Acts 8:26, NLT). In Acts, the writer (Luke) presupposes that Jerusalem is ground zero for church activities, implying that Philip has returned to Jerusalem from Samaria. Philip was now directed southwest into the desert. Initially, Philip was not told what to do in Gaza. However, this lack of information did not stop him. He was obedient to the word from God and immediately obeyed. We should note that while Peter and Paul are noted for their great preaching ability, Philip was outstanding in the area of obedience. Whenever the Spirit directed him, Philip heeded. Because he was so sensitive to the direction of the Holy Spirit, it is clear that prayer and the study of God's Word must have been integral parts of Philip's life. How much more effective would Christians be today if we were more sensitive and obedient to the Holy Spirit?

On the road, Philip encountered a fellow traveler. Scripture tells us four important things about this man. First, we are told that he was a man from Ethiopia. Native Ethiopians were Black people. The man was from a distant country located along the upper Nile. At this time in history, Ethiopia was located in the area we now know as Sudan. We then learn that he is a eunuch in the court of Candace, queen of Ethiopia, and "had the charge of all her treasure." Finally, we're told that he had come to Jerusalem to worship.

Biblical scholars provide varied interpretations of what it means that the Ethiopian man was a eunuch. One group takes the position that the term "eunuch" designates that he was a government official. They also say he was a circumcised Jewish proselyte. This group uses as proof the fact that he was in Jerusalem to worship. Temple worship dictated both his Jewish conversion and his circumcision. Others believed that because the man was in the service of a queen, the Ethiopian had been castrated. If this second theory were correct, Mosaic Law would have prohibited him from joining "the congregation of the LORD" (Deuteronomy 23:1).

## **2. PHILIP WITNESSES IN THE SPIRIT (VV. 29-35)**

The Gaza road was well traveled; certainly, other chariots had passed Philip. The Spirit directs Philip to "Go near, and join thyself to this chariot" (v. 29). This was no chance meeting. Philip was being purposefully led by the Holy Spirit to be with this man at this time. In this way, Philip was like Jesus. He did not mind leaving the crowds behind to deal with one lost soul. Notice Philip's zeal: He ran to the Ethiopian's chariot. Philip recognized the seriousness of his missionary work. Do we move quickly to assist in the salvation of the lost?

Because the Ethiopian eunuch was reading from the Book of Isaiah, we can safely assume that this man took the religion of Judaism seriously. Ethiopia was one of the areas among which the Jews were scattered after the Babylonian conquest (Isaiah 11:11). The eunuch may have had contact with Jews in Ethiopia or in nearby Egypt, where a great many Jews

settled. Similarly, the fact that he could read Greek could be explained by the fact that from the time of Ptolemy II (306–246 B.C.), the Ethiopian kingdom had become partially Hellenized, or made to reflect Greek culture.

The custom of the time was to read Scripture aloud. Upon hearing the Ethiopian man reading, Philip asked if he understood what he was reading. In Acts 8:31 he said, in effect, “How can I unless someone shows me the way?” The eunuch was confused by what he was reading and needed someone to explain the Scripture to him. The man’s sincerity and willingness to learn were demonstrated by his invitation to Philip to come into the chariot and sit with him. Like many people today, the Ethiopian eunuch earnestly sought the truth, but he lacked saving faith in Jesus Christ and needed someone to show him the way. We must recognize that God could have allowed an angel to explain the Scripture to him but instead commissioned Philip. Similarly, Jesus has commissioned, ordered, and instructed each and every Christian to share the Gospel with others.

The Ethiopian had been reading from Isaiah 53, a passage describing the humiliation and suffering of the servant of God. He wanted to know, “Tell me, was the prophet talking about himself or someone else?” (v. 34, NLT). The Holy Spirit had been preparing Philip for this very moment. Philip “opened his mouth, and . . . preached unto him Jesus” (v. 35, KJV). Philip explained that the prophet Isaiah was describing Jesus, the Christ. The eunuch had no doubt heard great deal about this Jesus while in Jerusalem.

### **3. THE ETHIOPIAN CONFESSES CHRIST (VV. 36–39)**

During his preaching, Philip had probably talked about baptism. As soon as they came to a body of water, the eunuch asked if there was any hindrance to his being baptized right on the spot. Notice that Philip did not drill the Ethiopian on his knowledge and understanding of the Scripture. Philip simply asked him if he believed that Jesus was the Son of God. In other words, did he have faith? Obviously, at least to Philip, there were no impediments to this man’s baptism. Upon the Ethiopian’s simple confession of faith, “I believe,” Philip recognized the man was prepared to be placed under the lordship of Jesus and incorporated into the church (some early manuscripts do not have v. 37). Philip and the man entered the water, and the Ethiopian was baptized. At this moment, another prophecy of Isaiah was being fulfilled. This prophecy spoke of strangers, eunuchs, and other outcasts who would be given an “everlasting name” and called God’s people: “The Lord GOD, which gathereth the outcasts of Israel saith; Yet will I gather others to him, beside those that are gathered unto him” (Isaiah 56:8).

### **SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES**

Why was Philip on the road to Gaza (Acts 8:26)?

From where was the Ethiopian official returning when Philip encountered him (v. 27)?

Why did Philip approach the Ethiopian (v. 29)?

When they reached the water, what did the Ethiopian ask Philip (v. 36)?

## **DISCUSS THE MEANING**

Read Acts 1:8. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in Philip's evangelistic efforts?

Why do you think Philip was able to be so sensitive to the Holy Spirit's directives?

## **LIBERATING LESSON**

When Philip then was finalizing his successful missionary work in Samaria, the Spirit ordered him to go to Gaza. Instead of dragging his feet, Philip heeded the direction of the Holy Spirit and performed a life-saving evangelistic appeal to the Ethiopian official. Today's Christians would do well to follow Philip's example and get up and go! If we are to be witnesses for the Kingdom, we will have to maintain sensitivity to the Spirit rather than follow our own course of action. We will be more effective witnesses when we allow God to order our steps in every area of our lives.

## **APPLICATION FOR ACTIVATION**

Commit to daily personal devotion, prayer, and Bible study. Select a quiet time and place to do an uninterrupted reading of and meditation on the Word of God. You may find that early in the morning or in the evening just before you go to bed is best. Start with five minutes of reading the first week and add three to five minutes each week. You can start with the Daily Bible Readings.