

THE TRIUMPHS OF THE GOSPEL

Study 1

SPREADING THE GOOD NEWS ABROAD

Read: Acts 8

This chapter is a very important one. It stands between the martyrdom of Stephen and the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. We read in **chapter seven** of the challenge that the speech of Stephen brought to the high priest and rulers - a challenge which they were unwilling to face. In their madness and anger they stoned him to death. This was a memorable end to his brief life as a Christian. He had the honour of being the first of many thousands who would seal their testimony, with their blood. In this event we also see the beginnings of another vital event in early church history. Those who stoned Stephen **“laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul”**. (7: 58) **“Saul was consenting to his death”** (8:1) Stephen’s testimony was, no doubt, used by the Holy Spirit to speak to Saul, beginning the work of conviction, which eventually led to his conversion on the road to Damascus.

This sad event for the Church sparked off a crisis of bitter persecution for the Christians at Jerusalem. The result was a scattering of believers throughout Judea and Samaria. As so often happened, Satan over-reached himself. Instead of the Church dwindling, it expanded and grew. Remember the occasion when the Lord Jesus gave them their commission to be witnesses in **chapter 1: 8** and you will see how important the expansion was. Saul was to be an instrument to further God’s plan at this time, and he was, therefore, one of the chief figures in the action, (8: 3) However, we now know the full story, because God had His eye on this young man and soon he would be preaching instead of persecuting!

The Gospel came to Samaria through Philip the Evangelist. You will remember that he was one of the men chosen in **chapter 6: 5**. He was reckoned to be a man full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. He could be trusted to do God’s work well. We are told that he went down to Samaria’s city and proclaimed Christ to the people. He was just like a herald who proclaims someone, or something, important or wonderful. The effect of his proclamation was that multitudes heard and gave attention to the Word. Notice the signs of healing that went with the Word. (verses 6-7) The impact was great, and the Bible says that there was much joy in that city as a result. Study carefully the results of the work of Philip in Samaria.

verse 6 They gave heed with one accord.

verse 12 They believed.

verse 12 They were baptised.

verses 15-17 They received the Holy Spirit.

Here was another crisis in the early history of the Church - very similar to the happenings in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. It marked another stage in the outward progress of the Gospel. Notice how vital the Holy Spirit’s presence

was to the growth of the Early Church. We can learn from this event that where the Gospel is preached and people are saved and baptised, there is bound to be joy and power such as was seen at Samaria.

We have already said that what Satan could not do by force through persecution, he attempted through false means among Christians themselves. **Simon the Sorcerer** is a strange character. (verses 9-24) It is obvious that he possessed outstanding powers with which he amazed people. Notice what they said about him in **verse 10**. But it seems that when Philip came to Samaria with the gospel, Simon recognised that he was facing a greater power than he possessed. He watched Philip and saw the signs and miracles with amazement. **Verse 13** makes it very clear that Simon professed to believe and was baptised. The test of reality is seen when the apostles from Jerusalem lay their hands upon believers and they received the Holy Spirit. You will find it interesting if you look through Acts and note how often the laying on of hands took place. The request of Simon, however, shows where his real interest lay. He desired power and outward show. It is obvious from Peter’s words, (verses 20-22) that his profession meant nothing. Let us learn the lesson that it is sadly possible to go as far as Simon did and yet not to be really saved. Who can tell?

Look at **2 Timothy 2: 19** - it is important.

The incident of the conversion of the Ethiopian makes a wonderfully bright ending to the chapter. Philip, who has been seeing multitudes saved, is called by an angel to go to the help of one needy man. Here was a seeker after God. This is why he came to Jerusalem. Maybe he was disappointed. Yet here was a seeker sought by the Spirit of God. **Verses 30-35** are very wonderful. Old Testament Scriptures are used to bring this man to Jesus. Notice - Philip preached unto him **“Jesus”**. (verse 35) **Isaiah 53** gives a background to the Gospel that is clear and undeniable. It tells of the suffering Saviour who was **“wounded for our transgressions”**. God used it to speak to this man and after being baptised he went on his way rejoicing.

Let us ask ourselves as we close the study, which is most important - the conversion of thousands, as in the town of Samaria, or the conversion of one solitary Ethiopian in the desert? Often it is easy to consider ‘mass’ conversion as a spectacular proof of God’s power. What about individuals? We can learn here that God is a God of variety. He works in many ways. The conversion of one needy soul is as vital in the building of the Church as the conversion of thousands. Many thrilling stories could be taken from Church history to confirm this point. We see the danger of mass movements of blessing in the character of Simon. We see the possibilities of the conversion of one stranger, in that the Ethiopian went back to his own country to spread abroad the Gospel, and this might have resulted in many thousands in Ethiopia getting saved. We do not know. God moves according to His will. Each one of us finds Christ on our own - as individual sinners needing salvation, then God can use us to reach many others if we witness for Him.

Study 2

A LIGHT FROM HEAVEN

Read: Acts 3

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus was one of the great landmarks in the history of the Early Church. We have already learned in **chapter 7** that those who stoned Stephen laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. He was watching this cruel event and was obviously agreeing with it. (**8:1**) More than that he was actively hostile to every Christian. (**8:1**) He was a zealous, bigoted, Pharisee, who hated the Lord Jesus and His followers and the Gospel which they preached. Look at **Philippians 3:4-6** to find a profile of Saul's life before he was converted. Religiously he was blameless - a true Jew. Yet without Christ his life was a complete failure as far as God was concerned, and we would probably never have known about Saul of Tarsus if he had not met Christ on the Damascus road.

SAUL'S CONVERSION (verses 1-9)

Saul was determined to break up the Church, by arresting and putting into prison all that he found who were of **"the way"** (**verse 2**) This is an interesting description of the Christian Church which was used by many in those days. It implied that they were followers of the one who had said, **"I am the way"** **John 14: 6**. As Saul journeyed a light from Heaven arrested him. Saul of Tarsus would never be the same again. The Lord Jesus whom he was persecuting was alive and spoke to him, **"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"** (**verse 4**) We can learn here that God does reveal Himself to us when He wants to bless us with His salvation. Saul was surprised to find the challenge come from Heaven in answer to his question, **"Who are You Lord?"**, **"I am Jesus"**.

Can you imagine anything more challenging to this Pharisee than to find that the one who had been crucified because He was accused of being a blasphemer, was alive - very much alive? Saul was persecuting Christians because they claimed that Jesus was alive, and he now knew for himself that they were right. Life for Saul of Tarsus began on the Damascus road. He could say about the course of his life afterwards, **"for to me to live - (living) - is Christ"**. (**Philippians 1: 21**) The desire of his life, now that he knew that Jesus really was **"the Christ"**, was summed up in the question, **"What shall I do, Lord?"** (**Acts 22: 10**)

Pause here and make sure that you, too, are 'converted' - that you have received Jesus Christ into your life as a living Saviour.

SAUL'S COMMISSION REVEALED TO ANANIAS (verses 10-19)
Ananias was justifiably surprised at the vision and the command which he received from the Lord. (**verses 13-14**) Remember that he could not tell God anything that He did not know about Saul. God knew exactly what He was doing. Notice how He describes Saul in **verse 15**, **"He is a chosen vessel of Mine."**

Long before Saul ever thought of serving the Lord, God had set him apart to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Think about this carefully. Look at **Galatians 1: 13-16** and you will read there Paul's account of his early life. We can see that all the time Paul was fighting against the gospel, God was waiting for the moment when His plan for him would be fulfilled. This hater of Christians was to carry the name of Jesus to the Gentiles. Yet he was to suffer many things in the process. (**Acts 9: 15-16**) Ananias goes with the message to Saul and Saul's eyes are opened. He is filled with the Holy Spirit and eventually baptised. (**verses 17-18**)

The fact that he was willing to openly obey the Lord in this way was further evidence to true conversion.

SAUL'S CHANGE (verses 20-30)

An immediate change came in the life of Saul of Tarsus at his conversion. Later on he was to write in **2 Corinthians 5: 17**, **"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things are passed away; behold, all things have become new."** This is forcibly evident in the verses we study. Instead of persecuting the Christians, Saul proclaimed Jesus as the Son of God. (**verse 20**) Instead of making havoc among those who called on the name of Jesus, he dwelt with them and was a great help to them. But the keen edge of persecution now came to him very quickly. **Verses 23-25** show how his life was in danger. He was to experience much of this for the rest of his life. Introduced by Barnabas to the Christians at Jerusalem, he preached powerfully in the name of the Lord. (**verse 29**) One great lesson from this story is that God has power to change the worst of men and make them useful servants in His work. What could He do with you?

Verse 31 is a key verse in Acts because it marks a climax in the movement of the church. **Chapter 6:7** is just like it, and we shall look at others. The consequences of the conversion of Saul were tremendous. Notice Churches of **"Judea, Galilee and Samaria had peace."** The tyrant had been conquered. Now they were built up and comforted and through it all were multiplied. Satan's kingdom was assailed and many were brought into the Kingdom of God. What a difference one man in God's hand can make to the spread of the gospel.

PETER (verses 32-43)

This latter part of the chapter begins a new section with Peter as the prominent figure. Notice that miracles again come into the work of God. A paralysed man is healed. (**verse 33**) Then a dead woman is raised to life again. Aeneas and Dorcas are used to display the power of God through Peter. If you look at **verse 35** and **verse 42** you will notice that the effect of the miracles was that people **"turned to the Lord"**. God uses the means He chooses to bring people to Christ.

Study 3

GENTILES INVITED

Read: Acts 10 & 11

You will find it most interesting and helpful to make a personal study in Acts to see just how God saved various individuals. You would see how wonderfully varied these are. Already in **chapter 8** we have seen an Ethiopian converted in the desert. Then we have studied perhaps the most vital of all conversions, that of Saul of Tarsus. Now we are going to look at the way in which Cornelius found the Saviour. He was a Roman centurion, a Gentile. Why is the conversion of Cornelius so important? It is because, through him, the door was opened to the Gentiles to share in the blessings of the Gospel.

THE APPROACH (10: 1-25)

We have already remarked that the Gospel was for the Jew first. Yet it was not only for the Jew. The sad fact soon comes out that perhaps the early Jewish Christians would have liked it that way. As we consider the circumstances preceding this great event, we notice how, behind the scenes, God was preparing the way for Cornelius to find salvation. Cornelius was a man who had much that was

commendable as far as God was concerned. **Verses 2 & 4** make this clear. But he needed more! However religious and good a man might be, without Christ he has not found the secret of life. We can also learn that God is always waiting to give light to those who are sincerely seeking Him.

It is interesting to notice the 'two-way' process of leading Peter and Cornelius to meet one another. Cornelius is told by the angel of God to send to Joppa for Peter. (**verse 5**) The exact address is given and the journey of the messengers to Peter begins. At the same time the Lord speaks to Peter in a dream. The lesson of the "**great sheet**" is very clear: "**What God hath cleansed, you must not call common (or unclean)**". (**verse 15**) Three times this is done so that there can be no mistake in Peter's mind as to the lesson he must learn. The task Peter faced was that of sharing the Gospel with those who, to Jewish minds, were outsiders and unclean - 'Gentile dogs'. He would look back on this dream many times in later years.

The approach is finalised when Peter and the messengers meet. Notice that it was as Peter thought on his vision that the Spirit told him of those who sought him. (**verse 19**) Here again is the work of the Holy Spirit in guiding the early Christians. How vital it was to obey Him. This was an historic meeting. Jews and Gentiles met as the first stepping stone to contact with Christ and His salvation. Next day they go on their way to Caesarea. It is good to reflect here on the perfection of God's work in preparation.

THE MEETING (10: 24-33)

This great centurion was to enquire into the meaning of the unseen intervention in his life. The family and friends of Cornelius were gathered together. To Peter it was a unique experience. Notice **verse 28**, "**You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation**". Yet Peter was able to say "**God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.**" We read this and at once think of **John 3: 16** - the universal love of God. Not one person is outside of this scope. So Cornelius is ready to hear what God has to say. (**verse 33**) Where there are people who are ready to listen, God is always willing to speak. His word is vital for man's blessing.

THE EXPLANATION (10: 34-43)

Now we have Peter's explanation of the Gospel's message to the household of Cornelius. Study these verses very carefully. It is good to grasp the facts that Peter, in a concise way put over to his audience. **God shows no partiality. (10: 34)** An essential point to emphasise is found in **verse 35**. He then centres attention on Christ; His life, death and exaltation. The Lord had commanded them to preach, and they were His witnesses. (**verses 36-42**) He will be the eventual Judge of both living and dead, (**verse 42**) This is one of the clearest speeches in Acts. These Gentile listeners were left in no doubt as to the message that they needed. **Verse 43** is the climax: believing in Christ brings remission of sins. Peter fulfilled his task well. We can pause here and remember that today God has no other message to give. We preach the same Gospel about the same glorious Saviour. The appeal is just the same and the effects are just as real.

THE EXPERIENCE (10: 44-48)

The Holy Spirit came upon them and the evidences were the same as on the day of Pentecost. They all spoke in tongues and glorified God. The word went around: "**The gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also.**" (**verse 45**) Think of the significance of this. In the context of Christianity, both Jew and Gentile are linked together in the experience of the possession of the Holy Spirit. It is good to know that God is greater in His love than racial, religious and social barriers. The

pouring out of the Holy Spirit, as at Pentecost and on this occasion, were exceptional events for the special purpose mentioned. However, God still gives His Holy Spirit today, at conversion, to all who believe on the Lord Jesus for salvation, whether they are Jew or Gentile.

THE AFTERMATH Chapter 11

Instead of the Jewish Christians being glad about the inclusion of Gentile converts, we see from **verse 3** that the old prejudices were raised against Peter. He ate with "**uncircumcised**" people. They were 'outside the pale' of Jewish privilege - they were outcasts! Peter had to give to them an explanation of all that happened, and later this grows into a major confrontation at the Council of Jerusalem **chapter 15**. Read the chapter carefully and you will see how easily Christianity could have ended as just another Jewish sect. We can thank God that He widened the boundaries. "**God is no respecter of persons.**" (**10: 34 - AV version**)

Notice as you close your study the growing importance of Antioch in the spread of the Gospel. (**verses 19-26**)

Study 4

MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Read: Acts 13 & 14

I hope you will read **chapter 12** although we are not studying it closely. Notice that at the beginning of the chapter it seemed as if Herod, the cruel tyrant had the upper hand. By the end of the chapter he is dead, and a most sad and shameful death at that. The Lord answered his blasphemy by judging him publicly. **Verse 24** is another of those climaxes - "**The Word of God grew and multiplied.**" It is just one of Luke's reminders that there is an authority in the Word that is invincible. Herod could do his worst - multiplication was the result as far as the Church was concerned.

We now return to study again the movements of the Apostle Paul. He has been called the greatest missionary of the Christian Church and there is no doubt that he was tireless in his efforts to spread the Gospel among the Gentiles. The book of the Acts recalls three of his journeys.

FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY (chapters 13 & 14)

Beginning at Antioch in Syria, it is reckoned that this lasted not less than three to four years. When he had finished he came back to Antioch.

SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY (chapters 15 to 18)

Beginning again at Antioch in Syria, his tour included the great cities of the Grecian world. Back again to Antioch in Syria.

THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY (chapters 19 to 21)

Beginning for the third time in Antioch in Syria, he visits other great cities, gradually moving on to Jerusalem. If you have a map trace carefully the course of the journeys. They show how rapidly the word was spread abroad.

THE COMMISSION

Look first of all at the commission of the apostle Paul and Barnabas in **chapter 13: 1-3**. Here you have a band of praying Christians at Antioch. Antioch seems to be the focal point in spreading the Gospel to the Gentile world. The apostles go out from here - they return here also after their labours. The Holy Spirit makes it clear that they are set apart for this work. (**verse 2**)

The Church shows its fellowship with them by laying hands upon them and sending them forth. The Holy Spirit directs the operations. Remember in the work of the Lord, prayer and fellowship are wonderful and vital.

THE COURSE

It is quite easy to follow the course of this first missionary journey. They began at Cyprus, then on to Salamis. (**chapter 13: 4-5**) Then from Paphos to Perga, on to Antioch of Pisidia. (**chapter 13: 13-15**) Following this, they move to Iconium, Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe; thriving cities with important communities. The journey is a circular one, for they pass back through these cities to Attalia, (**chapter 14: 25**) and then back to Syrian Antioch. You will notice, as you study, that in all these places the synagogues are the places of Jewish worship in Gentile cities. Here the religious life of the nation was pursued, and it was there the apostles sought to preach Christ. Notice in **13: 16** how Paul addresses the people, "**Men of Israel and you who fear God**". Historians say that the 'God-fearer' could be found in every synagogue. They were those who were seeking the values of religion from the Jews. Some of them became Jewish proselytes. Whatever this really means, we notice that the Apostles went where the people were. They did not wait for the people to come to them. This is a valuable lesson to learn in our witness for Christ.

THE CONTACTS

You will notice their contacts were varied. It is obvious that the field was widening and that the Gentiles were being drawn into the circle. There were people like Sergius Paulus (**13: 7**) who was stirred by the message. His was an enquiring mind and he was prepared to believe. But there were others, like Elyrnas the sorcerer, who set out to hinder the work of God. Paul (called this for the first time in **13: 9**) speaks with the authority of the Holy Spirit to judge this man. Sergius believes while Elyrnas is blinded for a time. (**13: 11**) There are people like the cripple at Lystra **chapter 14: 8**, who feel the physical blessing of contact with the apostles. Then there are the superstitious who reckoned that Paul and Barnabas were gods and proceeded to worship them. (**14: 11-16**) It is good to notice the difference in the apostles' approach to Gentiles. Read Paul's speech in **chapter 13: 16-41**, mainly spoken to Jews, and the words he spoke to the Gentiles who would worship them in **chapter 14: 14-18**. It is the same Gospel, but the presentation is different. It gives us an insight into methods of telling others about Christ. We need to learn how to deal with unsaved people - God's guidance is essential.

THE CONCLUSION

Two factors which shaped the future of Paul's ministry come out clearly in these two chapters. The violent Jewish opposition was unmistakable and this grew as the days passed by **chapters 13: 50-52; 14: 2-4**. They not only refused to believe but sought to hinder the Gentiles and also other Jews who wanted to believe. We would use the expression 'dog in the manger' for their attitude. No wonder Paul turned to the Gentiles.

The second great factor that emerges is the ready reception of the gospel by the Gentiles. **Chapter 13: 46-49** describes the great turning point in the direction in which evangelism moved - out to the nations. It does make plain the great truth that if some refuse God's love and grace, others benefit and come into blessing. It is most dangerous for anyone to refuse the light of the Gospel. At Antioch, where they had begun their first mission, the apostles told of the open door of faith to the Gentiles **chapter 14: 26-28**. A thrilling end to a great journey!

Questions

Study 1

SPREADING THE GOOD NEWS ABROAD

1. Look at the closing verses of **chapter 7** and then indicate the way in which Stephen as he died, was like the Lord.
2. Give two of the results of the work of Philip in Samaria.
3. What was the sin of Simon the Sorcerer?
4. Who told Philip to go into the desert to meet the Ethiopian and who 'caught him away' afterwards?
5. What have you learned in this study about the way that God works in the lives of people?

Study 2

A LIGHT FROM HEAVEN

1. What was the outstanding fact that was revealed to Saul at his conversion?
2. What did the Lord tell Ananias that Saul of Tarsus was to Him?
3. How did Saul show the change that had come into his life?
4. What consequences did the conversion of Saul have upon the Church?
5. What effect did the two miracles recorded in this chapter have upon the people?

Study 3

GENTILES INVITED

1. What good things do we learn about Cornelius before he became a Christian?
2. What was the lesson that God wanted Peter to learn from his dream?
3. Give two things you learn about the work of the Holy Spirit from **chapter 10**.
4. Who was the main theme of Peter's message to Cornelius?
5. What would Christianity have become if a lot of Jewish Christians had had their way?

Study 4

MISSIONARY JOURNEY

1. How did the Church at Antioch show its fellowship with Paul and Barnabas in their mission?
2. In what way were Jerusalem and Antioch important to the Early Church?
3. Give the main difference in the attitude of Sergius Paulus and Elyrnas the Sorcerer to the Gospel.
4. Why did Paul turn away from the Jews to the Gentiles with the Gospel message?
5. What did Paul and Barnabas tell the Christians at Antioch when they returned from their journey?