**Transformed: A Survey of the Book of Acts**

**Week 6 (February 13, 2019)**

**Acts 8:4-39 (For full context, please read Acts 6-8:3 prior to teaching time)**

**Helpful Background**

1. Chapter 8 begins a new section of the book of Acts. The focus of the early Church, moves from “Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth.” (Acts 1:8) Luke uses the death of Stephen, and the resulting persecution of the Church, to propel the narrative into a new energetic phase of outreach and expansion. (As sparks fly outward from a burning log if it is struck, so the “on fire” followers of Christ scattered outward from Jerusalem after the death of Stephen.) The followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, had not yet begun to fulfill the “Great Commission,” (Matt. 28:19-20) and may have expected all interested in Jesus to come to them. The death of Stephen compelled them to “go” out, and take the gospel message with them.

2. Those followers of Jesus who had been scattered out of Jerusalem did not run and hide. They fled Jerusalem, but they proclaimed the truth of the gospel message wherever they journeyed. One of the boldest messengers, Philip, traveled into Samaria, the region to the north of Jerusalem.

3. In the first century under Roman rule, historical Israel had been divided into three main regions; Galilee in the north, Samaria in the middle, and Judea in the south. The city of Samaria had been the capital city of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, during the days of the divided kingdom. It had been conquered in 722 BC., and then repopulated with foreigners. These new inhabitants had intermarried with the remaining Jews, thus producing those known as Samaritans in the New Testament. These Samaritans were viewed with scorn by the Jews, as poor, half-breeds, and unworthy of God’s attentions. There were centuries of historical, religious, and racial tensions between the Jews and the Samaritans. (Jesus had bridged the gap between these two peoples, and He commanded His followers to take the gospel to them as well. John 4, Acts 1:8)

4. Jews hated Samaritans. The hatred had gone back centuries, and was as bad as any racial or religious tensions that we may know of from our own experience or history. Generations earlier, Samaritans had been Jews living in the northern kingdom. Over the centuries of inter-marriages, a “mixed race” called “Samaritans” had developed. Even worse, the Samaritans had established a type of Judaism, but one not in submission to the Jewish hierarchy in Jerusalem.

5. Because the Samaritans had lost Jewish purity, they were considered to be worse than Gentiles. “Good” Jews avoided contact with Samaritans or even walking through their territory. “Good” Jews, especially religious teachers, would go way out of their way to journey around Samaria, so that they would not have to even walk near Samaritans at all. No religious official or teacher would have any contact with Samaritans, and would not even acknowledge the presence of a Samaritan nearby.

6. Simon the magician lived and worked in Samaria, and had become famous for his “signs” and personal power. Many magicians and sorcerers made their livings by using magic tricks and powers to amaze the people. Simon’s ego always played a part in his work, as he boasted of his own greatness, and desired to increase his own power and fame. Simon had developed a loyal following, who were quickly undermined by the true “signs and wonders” shown by the power of the Holy Spirit working through Philip, Peter, and John. Simon tried to become a follower of Jesus, but was later suspected of wrong motives, as he tried to buy the “power” from Peter.

7. When word reached the apostles in Jerusalem of the happenings in Samaria, Peter and John were sent to check it out. The leaders of the early Church were still unsure if Samaritans (half Jews) and Gentiles (non-Jews) were actually included in God’s plan of salvation, (Jesus Christ) or not. They were combating years of training, cultural bias, and confusion about how God would include non-Jews in His salvation plans. They wanted to see for themselves if God was saving the Samaritans, and if that salvation would be confirmed by the giving of the Holy Spirit.

8. The visit of Peter and John to Samaria is key for the unity of the early Church. The intense dislike that existed between the Jews and the Samaritans had lasted for centuries. It had to be made clear that all those who trust and believe in Jesus Christ are part of “one body,” regardless of racial, cultural, or religious background. The gift of the Holy Spirit confirms that the Samaritans are equal with all Jewish believers, and the key leaders of “the Church,” are present to witness God’s inclusion and acceptance of these “half Jews” into His family. God poured out His Holy Spirit, in this dramatic way, to confirm and affirm the salvation of the Samaritans who believed, but also to include and empower them in the work of the Church.

9. Philip, directly led by God, encountered a high royal official from Ethiopia, who had journeyed to Jerusalem to worship. In the centuries of the Old Testament, the Jews had connected with those who lived in the region that later became Ethiopia, (Psalm 68:31, Jeremiah 38:7) so this official may have been a Gentile convert to Judaism, or may have been an interested “God fearing” Gentile. He had some of the Old Testament scriptures, and had been prepared by God to hear, understand, and accept the good news. The textual variant that appears in many translations as v. 8:37 demonstrated clearly that the official understood. (Some manuscripts add verse 37, “You can,” Philip answered, “if you believe with all your heart.” And the eunuch replied, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God!)

10. God clearly, and miraculously, orchestrated the meeting between Philip and the Ethiopian official. God set up a “Divine appointment” on the road that day, and had carefully prepared Philip and the Ethiopian official for the situation. Philip’s job was simply to be obedient, and yield himself to God, and “show up” for the appointment that God had arranged.

**Review Questions**

11. (8:4-5) What’s significant about how the scattered believers respond to hard times? What’s significant about where Philip goes? Why him? What was the difficult history between Jews and Samaritans?

12. (8:6-8) What was the response in Samaria? What happened to confirm the message about Jesus that Philip had proclaimed? What was he able to do through the Holy Spirits’ power? What was the general response?

13. (8:9-11) Who was Simon? What was his nickname and how was he famous? What had been his reputation and what had he been able to do?

14. (8:12-13) What had changed? Why was Simon’s popularity fading? What happened? How did he believe? What did he do after he believed? (Possibly because everyone else was doing it!) Why was he “impressed” with Philip?

15. (8:14-17) Why was news about the Samaritans coming to faith in Jesus quite surprising to those in Jerusalem? Who did they send to confirm? What reality about the Holy Spirit did Pete & John discover? Why was the Spirit seemingly delayed for these believers? What happened?

16. (8:18-20) How did Simon react to the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Samaritans? What did he try to do? Why did Simon try this? What was Peter’s response? Why did Pete get so fired up?

17. (8:21-25) How did Peter continue to respond to Simon? What did he call him to do? Why? How is this different from how earlier major sins within the young Church are handled?) Acts 6, Ananias & Sapphira?) How did Simon respond?

18. (8:26-28) How did Philip know where to go? What directions were given to Philip? How specific were they? What did Philip do? Who did Phil meet? Who/what was this official?

19. (8:29-31) How did the Holy Spirit direct Philip? Again, what specific instructions were given? What did Philip do & say?

20. (8:32-35) What had the official been reading but not understanding? How did Philip help? What did Phil talk to the official about, and how did he work that into a conversation about Jesus? What happened?

21. (8:36-38) Why did the official want to be baptized? What vital step was important to clarify in the textual variant that may or may not have been added by Luke? (v. 8:37) Why was baptism so important to the official? What conditions or limitations did Philip put on baptism? What happened when they pulled over by the side of the road?

22. (8:39) What happened as soon as the baptism was completed? Why? What role did the Holy Spirit serve in the end of the chapter? How did it happen?

**So What?**

23. What can we learn from the believers who were scattered out from Jerusalem after the death of Stephen? What can God do, even through tragedy? What did their actions and attitudes indicate?

24. What can you learn from the example of Philip, Peter, and John going to the Samaritans? Who needs/deserves Jesus? How did they overcome their own training, culture, and past experiences?

25. What can we learn from the example of Philip? How did he respond to the not-so-specific directions that he was given? How does God still set Divine appointments for us today? Have you experienced any such appointments in recent times? How did you handle it?