

narrow, and difficult to find. It is the way that leads to destruction which is broad, and has many in it (Matthew 7:13-14).

Let us ask ourselves how much we know about these things. Is our Christianity something that is very easy, and costs us very little? A pleasant bit of religion here and there, to keep our consciences quiet? What sacrifices does it actually involve? The thing which costs nothing is worth it. If we would have the gold of pleasing Christ, then we must be prepared to pay the price. Our trials cannot save us. That belongs to the blood of Christ alone. But they are necessary to prove that we belong to him.

Expository thoughts on **The Acts Of The Apostles**

Daily Bible Reading Notes

Week 6 (Chapter 8:1-9:19)

Grace Church Belper

<http://www.gracebelper.org.uk>

(For previous weeks' notes, visit <http://www.gracebelper.org.uk/readingnotes.php>)

Acts 8:1-8

1 Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. 3 As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. 4 Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. 5 Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. 6 And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. 7 For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralysed and lame were healed. 8 And there was great joy in that city.

These verses open a new part of the book of Acts. For the first time, the gospel is preached outside of Judea. Christ's words (1:8) of a few years earlier are being fulfilled. Luke is taking us out of Jerusalem. We have begun the journey to "the ends of the earth". Let us understand what we are reading.

The first thing we see in these verses is that *persecution now came to the whole church*. Before now, there had been persecution. Peter and John had been put in prison (4:3). All the apostles together had been jailed (5:18). Stephen had been stoned to death. But the church at large had been left alone. The enemies of the truth had aimed blows here and there. But in general, the church was highly esteemed, and nobody could move against it (5:13). Now, though "a great persecution" rose (v1). And it was a great persecution "against the church". Its agents now acted seemingly without restraint. It was thorough, Saul going from house to house. It was harsh. A great number were scattered. For others, it meant prison, and even death (26:10).

It is not always God's will for the church to enjoy peace. Certainly, peace is good. We are told to pray "that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty." (1 Timothy 2:2). But God also will allow the church's faith to be tried, and believers to be tested. The difference between true and false believers must be shown up. Real children of God must be purified that they might come forth like gold. Hypocrites must be dissuaded from joining God's holy church. The world must see that Jesus Christ is worth both living and dying for. The angels must witness the power of God's sustaining grace. There are many reasons in the wisdom of God for allowing hard times to come to the church. We often cannot know what reasons are behind his sovereign decrees. But we can be sure that difficult times will often come. "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12). "We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

There is only one path to heaven. It is the path that the master beat out. Before glory, there was a cross. He asks us to do nothing that it is not infinitely less than he did. He

Saul was destined to be the greatest preacher after Christ that ever lived. His work would be to be the first missionary to the Gentile world. He would plant churches in over a dozen countries. He would take the gospel across the known earth. He would exercise all the authority of Christ, as an apostle sent out by him. He would write half of the New Testament. He would testify before rulers and kings. He would become one of the major figures of all human history. Even today, every year brings new books about him and the things he wrote. Across the world, thousands are probably doing the same as you at this moment - reading about him. And yet the Lord very clearly showed him that he was an equal with every other Christian - right at the start of his Christian life. The Lord did not take away Saul's blindness himself. He sent an "ordinary" disciple to do it. He did not impart the Holy Spirit directly from heaven. He commissioned an otherwise unknown believer to lay hands upon him. Saul must be baptised just as every other follower of Christ was baptised. He must be marked out as a disciple just in the way every other one was. He must spend some time with the disciples at Damascus (v19), and benefit from them.

There is a great lesson for us in here. No believer is any higher than any other. There are no ranks or hierarchies in the church of Christ. It is true that there are roles and responsibilities. But they all roles for servants. None of them are for masters. The church is to have only one Lord. No man must "lord it over the flock" (1 Peter 5:3). Neither must any say that he is nothing, and of no importance in the church of Christ. Each one has had Christ's precious blood shed for them. Each one is of infinite value in his sight. This is something we must remember all the time. We are always prone to lifting up or putting down one another in our minds. We all carry around a list of those who are great, and those who are small. But this is all worldly thinking. It is not how the Lord sees us at all. He sees us all as brethren, and commands us to do the same. Unless we are willing to serve all, we cannot truly serve any. Let us put away all ungodly pride from our hearts and minds, and may God help us to do so.

Let us notice secondly that when God calls someone to serve, he also calls them to suffer. It was true in Saul's case, and it shall be true in ours too. Saul had come to Damascus to make Christians suffer. Ananias knew all about that. But in due time the Lord would show Saul how much he must suffer, for Christ's name. He would have great privileges. But he would also know great pain. What a catalogue Saul recorded in later years! "... in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths often. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which comes upon me daily, the care of all the churches." (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). And this list was far from complete. Saul learnt that the way to heaven is not a path of ease. It is the way of the cross. The true servant of Christ will be like his master. The way into the kingdom of God is

to learn a meek and selfless spirit. God had given him great gifts. But if they were to be used for the gospel, he must first be brought low. He must become weak and helpless, like a little child. He must learn complete dependence upon God. He must know that there was one who rules over all the affairs of men. He must come to depend entirely upon him, and not on himself. Blinded, he must be led by the hand, and wait three days until the time that the Lord chose.

This is a vital lesson for every believer. It is a great benefit for us to be brought low. We do not like it at the time. But it works in us a great deal of good. When we learn to think little of ourselves, we can have great thoughts of God. When we see how helpless we are, we can cry out for a greater help. When all pride and self have been drained away, we will give the glory to God. If we would serve God, this is where we must come.

Acts 9:10-19

10 Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am Lord." 11 So the Lord said to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. 12 And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight. 13 Then Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. 14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." 15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of mine to bear my name before Gentiles, kings and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how many things he must suffer for my name's sake. 17 And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptised. 19 So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus.

Here we meet a man who we know nothing else about. Ananias does not appear anywhere else in the New Testament. There are three men with his name in Acts. One is a believer who falls into horrible sin (5:1-5). Another is this disciple in Damascus. Another is the high priest who later persecutes Saul (23:2, 24:1). They each present an interesting picture. We can only imagine what this disciple thought and felt as he listened to the Lord! But he was obedient to the command, and his name has been recorded for all believers since. Let us look carefully at what lessons we may learn.

The great lesson in this passage is that all believers stand on one and the same level. In the church of Christ, all are brethren. There is one elder brother, who is the Lord. But everybody else stands upon the same level before him. This is shown in a number of striking ways.

requires from us nothing approaching what he once knew. He suffered to atone for our sins. We must suffer to prove our union with him. This is God's will.

We must lose all our ideas that Christianity should bring us health and ease. To be sure, a time without pain or death is coming. To be sure, we have infinite spiritual riches in Christ, and shall one day only know bliss forever more. But that day has not yet come. This life is a time of testing, and being purified. We must endure to the end, if we would be saved. That which costs nothing, is worth nothing. Christ is worth our all, and so we must be prepared to give it for him. Let us not lose heart if our testimony is opposed in the places where we live. We must not be discouraged if we are scorned, or ignored, or lose our friends. Let us embrace whatever God has willed, and cling on to him.

Let us see secondly in these verses *the contrast between two men*. When Stephen died, "devout men" took notice. They carried him away to be buried; they mourned with "great lamentation". Godly men must die; but they do not go unnoticed. God himself takes special notice of them, and the Holy Spirit took care to record these words about Stephen in Scripture. It is not wrong to lament the event of death. Death is the greatest tragedy of all. It is the great curse that came because of sin (Genesis 2:17, Romans 6:23). If death is not allowed to cause us grief, then nothing is.

Contrast Stephen with Saul. Saul was not mourning Stephen's death. He was there, approving of it (v1). But that one death was not enough for Saul. He was then at the heart of the great persecution which arose. It was not enough for him to confront the Christians who spoke in public. He would hunt them down, entering into their homes (v3). He did not concentrate only on the leaders. He took "men and women", wherever he could, and dragged them off to prison (v3). The contrast between these two men could not be greater. And yet Saul would die as a godly man too. Every reader of Luke's would know that Saul would be converted. And this is the Saul who was converted: a fanatic, a murderer, a tireless enemy of godliness and truth.

We must never think that anyone is beyond the saving power of Christ. There may be someone now who is very opposed to the gospel. They may be filled with hatred and spite. They may resist it wherever they can. But we must not lose heart. We must remember what God can do. If the Lord has worked in our lives, then he can work in others too. If we have been changed by Jesus Christ, then others can be changed as well. Let us not cease to pray, and to witness, to what we know is the truth.

Let us observe thirdly that *God turned the persecution into a great blessing*. What Saul intended for evil, God used for good. Up until this time, the gospel was preached in and around Jerusalem. Afterwards, it was being preached throughout the land. Before, there was one church in the world. At the end of the chapter, Samaria will have embraced the good news too. Those who were scattered "went everywhere preaching the word" (v4). Saul sought to scatter them to destroy them. But God used it to strengthen his work. In these verses we see the promises of Christ being fulfilled. He said that his disciples would be his witnesses, not only in Judea but in Samaria too. But God's promises are

often strange! The way which they are brought about is not how we would expect. But they are nonetheless very definitely brought about. When Philip went to Samaria, God has with him, and miracles were performed. He preached Christ. Many believed. A vast number were healed. The result was great joy.

This is what God does. Maybe you can only see trouble in your circumstances right now. But God always acts in love towards his own child. If you belong to him, then you need not fear. He will not allow you to be tested beyond what you can bear (1 Corinthians 10:3). He may not take you out of the trouble. But he will be with you in it. And at a later time, you will be able to look back and see what good he accomplished, that could not be accomplished any other way. Let us praise and worship so awesome a God! His purpose is not that we should have ease. His purpose is to make known the glory of Jesus Christ. It is a purpose which he will achieve. There is no need for us to despair. God is at work. The end result will be "great joy".

Acts 8:9-17

9 But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practised sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, 10 to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the great power of God." 11 And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time. 12 But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women are baptised. 13 Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptised he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done. 14 Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, 15 who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. 16 For as yet he had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Luke is continuing to tell us how the gospel came to Samaria. The Samaritans were half-Jews. The Jews considered them unclean. They were compromised. They had mixed God's true religion with a great deal of corruption. They had been cut off from the religious life of Israel for many years. But now, the gospel had come to them. Everything was changing. Let us study these words to learn what happened.

For a first thing, let us notice *the gospel's great power to deliver and save*. The people in Samaria had been in chains for a long time. It was many centuries since the region had last practised true religion. And there was a particular man there who was deceiving them at this time. Simon "practised sorcery in the city", and used it to gather followers for himself. He had occult power, which he used to trick people, and to boost his own pride. We are told that his powers "astonished" the people. But when the gospel came to Samaria, they were immediately delivered from it. Simon's power seemed very great. He had ensnared his followers with it "for a long time" (v11). But

disciples of the Lord" (v1). His hatred was so great that it took him to cities in foreign lands. He was willing to drag back Christians hundreds of miles to punish them for their beliefs. He was now nearing the place to which he had travelled. He was about to enter the city to do all that he pleased. And at this moment the Lord invaded his life, and turned him completely around. The conqueror became a conquered. The one who came to take prisoners became the prisoner of Jesus. The one who came to lead others away, had to be led himself (v8). Before, he called Jesus an impostor and accursed. Now he called him "Lord" (v6). Before, he did as he pleased. Now, he said "what would you have me to do?" (v6).

God created the souls of men. And he knows how to bring them to yield to him. He does not lack the power to save. There are none beyond his reach. If he can convert a Saul, then he can convert anyone. "Salvation is of the Lord" (Jonah 2:9). We must never despair about the salvation of any. As long as God is God, we cannot lose heart. He can turn the most hardened opposer of truth into the most hard-working preacher of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:10). He has done it many times before, and he may do it again. If we have loved ones who are very opposed to the faith, we must not give up. They are not stronger than God. If he wills, they can be saved. Let us trust in him.

Let us see secondly the great truth of the union of Jesus Christ with his people. Jesus Christ suffered once for sin. On the cross, he endured the agony of his Father's wrath. At Calvary, he died and was placed in the grave. And there his sufferings ended. He rose from the dead, to die no more. He ascended to heaven, to reign in glory. He cannot experience anything more of humiliation or pain. He is exalted on high. But look at the words which he spoke here! He did not say, "why are you persecuting my people?" He said, "why are you persecuting me?". When Christ's people are attacked, the Lord Jesus is not indifferent. He sees the injury as if it were his own. When the church is scorned, it does not fall on death ears. The Saviour himself takes note of it. Whatever is done to the least of his people, is done to him (Matthew 25:40,45).

This is an essential Christian truth. The whole Christian life is one of union with Christ. It is signified by our baptism. If we are converted, then we died with him. Our old life is over. The ruling power of sin has been destroyed. We have risen with him, and live a new life to God. We have ascended with him, and sit in heavenly realms. We do not live as creatures of the earth. We live as those whose citizenship is in heaven. We are heirs of God, and co-heirs with Christ. The Father looks upon us, and sees his perfection. He has earned a great reward, and we shall share in it. But he has also suffered, and we must suffer for his sake too. Our hardships for the gospel are not meaningless. They are filled with significance. They show that we belong to him.

If we are converted, let us not live like those who do not know Jesus Christ! We have the highest of privileges. Let us every day remind ourselves that these things are so.

Let us see finally that before the Lord can use a man, he must humble him. Saul had come proudly and arrogantly to Damascus. It is true that he had a great deal of energy. What zeal, to go so far in his cause! But devotion alone is not enough. Saul needed now

Let us finally observe that the first step of Christian obedience required is to be baptised. It is obvious that Philip must have spoken about baptism. The eunuch could not have guessed that it ought to be done! He understood that he needed to become a disciple of this risen Lord. And he understood that first the act after believing is to be baptised. And how eager he was for it! He did not wait for Philip to urge him to it. When he saw the water, he asked if it could not be done right here and now! How different Philip's words are from those of many today. Many seem to think that baptism is for those who are very advanced. Only those who have gone far in holiness ought to be brought in to the church. Baptism must take months and years of getting ready, and at a time when every last relative can be there! Philip did not know much about this way of thinking. The eunuch believed, and that was enough for him. Baptism is not the last act of discipleship. It is the first. It is for babes in Christ, those who have only just begun. It is not an option, but required of us by the Lord. If we cannot obey in the very first thing, then we should ask ourselves if we really love the Lord at all. No doubt some have nerves. No doubt others are worried about water. But if Christ can rescue our souls from hell, he can help us through these things. If we can trust him that we might be saved, we can trust him for this too! It will be good for the churches when they take notice of this word of the Lord.

Acts 9:1-9

1 Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3 As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. 4 Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" 5 And he said, "Who are you Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." 6 So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do you want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." 7 And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. 8 Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

This must be one of the most famous parts of the book of Acts. The phrase "Damascus road experience" has become part of our language. But do we really understand what happened there? Do we really know what it meant? It is a key point in the book of Acts. Our eyes will now turn to non-Jews. Gentiles will now be called to Jesus Christ. First, Luke tells us how the future apostle to the Gentiles was saved.

The clearest lesson from these verses is that Jesus is Lord, and may convert whoever he pleases, whenever he pleases. Was there ever a less likely man to be saved than Saul? Was there ever a less likely time for him to be converted than this? He was in the very act of opposing the church. His very breath was full of "threats and murder against the

when Jesus Christ came to Samaria, it all counted for nothing. When the Samaritans believed the gospel, they were released. They were baptised, and became the disciples of Jesus instead. And even Simon himself was brought to confess his deceit, to believe, and to be baptised (v13).

The progress of the gospel is one of the great proofs that it is from God. The fact that it can triumph in any and every part of the world, shows that it is divine. The manner in which it can in a very short time be accepted in entirely new places can only be explained one way. That it can do this amongst all kinds of people, in all kinds of countries, backgrounds and cultures, points to one thing. The Christian message is not a set of human ideas. It is the everlasting gospel of the eternal God. The things which it declares are true. Jesus Christ really is at the right hand of God. He really does have all power in heaven and earth. He really is subduing the nations. He really is bringing all things into submission to himself. We have a great king!

Christ's power to save is part of his glory. There are no impossible cases with him. A person may have been an idolater for all his life. He may never have done a single thing, or had a single thought, that was intended by him to bring glory to the true God. He may have been following the most foolish superstitions, and be spiritually completely blind. But when Jesus Christ intervenes, yet for all this he may be wonderfully saved. And it does not have to take the Lord many years if he wills. He does not need a great deal of time to open a person's eyes. Any sinner can be saved in a single moment, by the intervention of Jesus Christ. It all depends upon him.

It is to Christ that we must look for all things. We cannot be saved without believing in his name (verse 12). He is the great king in the kingdom of God. He is the one who shall advance his own cause. He is the one who must be the first love of his church. He is the one who will bless it and cause it to grow. Let us hold fast to him, and let us pray that he might make his power known. Our country may be in a great deal of darkness. It may seem impossible for the tide to be turned. But if Jesus Christ acts, nothing is too hard. Let us make sure we are looking to him.

Let us see secondly in these verses that *there is only one church of Jesus Christ*. This is what we are being told as we read about the apostles coming to Samaria. There were new believers at Samaria. But as yet, they had not received the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a great mark of the church. He was promised by God for many years. Whilst he was of course at work before the coming of Christ, at Pentecost he came in a much fuller and more glorious way. But as yet, the Samaritan churches had not yet received him. For this reason, the apostles came down to them, and prayed (v15). Their prayers were answered, and the Spirit of God was given. He had been given to the Jewish believers; now he was given to the Samaritans also. This act clearly marked them out as one church. The believers were separated by many miles. And they would continue to have different cultures, and vary in their ways of life. But now they were also a unity. They had one Lord, and one Spirit. They had one baptism, and one faith. Whatever now separated them, it was less than all of this. The unbelieving Jews did not receive the Spirit of God. But the Samaritans who did believe, now became part of the one church.

This is something we must take to heart. If we are the Lord's people, then we are part of his one church. We may be divided by languages and thousands of miles. But whoever loves the same Jesus, and trusts in the same atoning death, and prays to the same Father, is our brother. He is closer to us than even our own flesh and blood. We will spend eternity with him, and be changed into the likeness of the same Lord.

This passage says nothing about having a single organisation or denomination. Such things would never have entered into the mind of the first believers. Organisations and denominations all have their useful places, no doubt. But it is not organisational unity that the Scriptures teach us about. It is about a unity which already exists between those who truly believe. It is a unity which is to be expressed, not through outward conformity, but through love that comes from within. Let us consider this deeply. Whom the Lord has joined together, let not any man part.

Acts 8:18-25

18 And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, 19 saying, "Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit." 20 But Peter said to him, "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! 21 You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. 22 Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. 23 For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity. 24 Then Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me. 25 So when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans."

The Holy Spirit has taken care to record a very interesting incident. We know that there were thousands in the early church in Judea (2:41, 4:4). But we know the names of only a very tiny number of them. Therefore we must take special notice of passages such as this. They are given to us for a reason. We are meant to learn something particular from them.

The first thing to see from Simon is that *not all apparent conversions are real*. Simon seemed to have come a long way. Before, he had been a sorcerer (v9). Until now, he had claimed to be "the great power of God" (v10). He had deceived many people, and made a great name for himself. But when he had heard the gospel, that had all seemed to change. He "also believed", he was baptised, and he continued with the evangelist Philip (v13). He saw what was done, and knew that it was a far greater power than the occult one into which he had tapped. But for all this, his heart was unchanged. Its ruling principle was not love to Christ. Deep within, money and power were still his gods. When he saw the great works of the Spirit, his heart turned to those things again. He desired to do what Peter could do. He wanted to exercise the power that the apostles

eunuch was reading the prophet Isaiah. The prophecy spoke of something he could not quite understand. It told of one who would suffer very greatly. Isaiah wrote of someone who would submit willingly to an undeserved death. But who was it? Was he speaking of himself? Or someone else? Who could it be? The eunuch was like every man. He knew that the Scriptures are the Word of God. He desired to understand them. He was sure that they contained essential truth. But he did not have the key. He could not unlock them. They were like a great puzzle to him, and he needed someone else to explain. Happily for him, a man of God was right at hand! "Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him." The one written of in the Old Testament is the Lord Jesus Christ. The whole book is pointing forward to him. Some places point only indirectly, and are more obscure. Others speak very plainly, and lead straight to him. This part of Isaiah was just such a place. The one who suffered, though being innocent, was Christ. He died on the cross in submission to the will of God. It was the Father's purpose to make him an offering for sin. It was the eternal plan of the Father and Son together that he should die in that way. He had no sin of his own. But he came to bear the sin of all who would believe in him. It was a most astonishing act. One of infinite holiness and perfection offered himself as a sacrifice to God. The one who had never sinned was punished for sins. Not for his own sins, but for the sins of his people. This was what Isaiah wrote about! He wrote about the sufferings, death, and resurrection of the Son of God.

The work of Jesus Christ is the greatest thing in all of history. It stands right at the heart of God's plan. It is the most important event that ever was or shall be. Through all eternity, people shall give God praise for what he did. Millions of souls shall be grateful for evermore that the Lord Jesus died for them. We should understand that there has only ever been one way to be saved. Those who lived before Jesus, had to trust the promises that he would come. Those who have lived since, must trust in the Christ who has come. There is one Christ, and both must trust in him. We who live afterwards have many great advantages. We can see God's purpose with much more light. But it is not a new purpose. It is one announced from the beginning. Let us then read the word of God with understanding. Its ultimate goal is to lead us to Jesus. Its central message is of what he has done. If we want to understand anything about true religion, or the way to God, we must search for the Lord Jesus Christ.

We must learn from this too what true evangelism is. It was Jesus that Philip preached to the eunuch - such that he was led to faith and to be baptised (v35). No doubt he referred to the prophecy of Isaiah. No doubt he carefully explained some of the words on the page. But he gave the man more than just something for his head. He declared Jesus, as the Saviour for his soul. He told him about his death on the cross. He explained that he must repent, and be baptised. He told him that he must bow to Jesus as Lord, and become a disciple. He led him to the Lord. Evangelism is not just the explaining of Christian truths. It is not just the defending of our way of life. It is the passionate pointing to the Son of God. It is a message which is personal, and insists that its hearers yield to the Lord. It is a message which requires something of its listeners - that they should become Christ's disciples too.

Christ. Let us wait upon him, and renew our strength. Our labours in the Lord cannot be in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Let us see too just as clearly that God, though sovereign, works through means. God is a God of perfect order. His wisdom is perfect. As he has planned for the gospel to advance, so he has planned every stage by which it shall do so. His way is not normally to intervene with a miracle. His way is to work through holy men and women. He could have sent an angel to speak to the eunuch. But instead, he sent an angel to speak to Philip, and Philip to speak to the man. He could have spoken directly from heaven to explain his own word. But instead, he sent a human preacher. He could have moved Philip in an instant to the spot. But instead, he had to run (v30)! There is a lesson in all of this. The gospel is a miraculous power. When a person is born again, it is a direct work of God. But God works through ways and means. He uses us in the spread of the gospel. He could have shown the risen Christ to the whole world. But instead he sent out human apostles to bear witness. He could appear from heaven today. But instead he uses the words of ordinary people upon earth.

All this requires faith. It requires a response, to show that we trust God. His normal way is not to use miracles. He uses ordinary folk. Do we believe that he can use us? Let us ask him that it might be so.

Acts 8:32-40

32 The place in the Scripture which he read was this: "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so He opened not His mouth. 33 In His humiliation His justice was taken away, and who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth." 34 So the eunuch answered Philip and said, "I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?" 35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him. 36 Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptised?" 37 Then 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." 38 So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptised him. 39 Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing. 40 But Philip was found at Azotus. And passing through, he preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea.

The meeting of Philip and the eunuch was a very interesting one! One of them was a very powerful official. He held a high office in the court of a great ruler. The other one we suppose was not notable in the world at all. But he was a Jew, and that was what the eunuch longed to be. And much more, he understood the Scriptures, which the eunuch could not.

These verses firstly tell us that Jesus is the ultimate subject of the Old Testament. The

had. He wanted the fame which was coming to them. What a question he asked! Can we believe it? Should we not be amazed? The apostles of God were before him. They were, as Christ worked through them, the instruments of the Holy Spirit of God. On whoever they laid hands, the Holy Spirit was given. But Simon did not ask to receive the Holy Spirit himself! He did not say "I want to be filled with the Spirit of God". He said, "I want the Spirit of God to be controlled by me". He did not desire holiness, or usefulness to Christ. He desired power and fame. He did not pray to become more like Jesus. He asked the apostles, and offered them a bribe. The Spirit of God was a gift (v20). But Simon's heart was still a stranger to grace. He could only think of money.

Peter's words make it clear that Simon was not a saved man. He had "neither part nor lot" in the work of the Holy Spirit. His heart was not right - he was still in chains. Bitterness had poisoned him, and he was still in iniquity's jail. He was yet still a captive of Satan and of sin (v23). God revealed these things to Peter, so that he could see Simon's true state. With many around us, whether they are really saved will be unclear. The Lord does not reveal to us as he revealed to his apostles. We must be very gentle, in case we crush a weak saint, or deny a real work of Christ. But Peter could see how Simon really was. Simon's talk was not that of a child of God. He did not repent with tears, and seek the Lord for himself. He feared the punishment of which Peter had talked (v24), but he did not lament the state that he was in. He asked Peter to pray for him (v24), but he did not pray for himself. These are all marks of the unconverted. They fear the consequences of sin, but they do not loathe sin itself. They think that their companions will bring them some special favour from God, but do not think of going to Christ themselves. Their hearts are still in bondage to idols, and Christ is not their Lord.

What a dreadful condition to be in! And yet it has been the condition of so many. It is something which our Lord tells us to expect. The seed is sown, but not all of it bears fruit. Some falls on the path, and has no effect at all. But in others, it seems to take root, and we hope for fruit - but there are thorns or rocks, and we are disappointed. The cares of this life, and the hardships of standing for Christ reveal that they were never really converted. We must not be surprised at these things. We must not backslide ourselves when we see others doing so. The heart is very deceitful. A man may seem to go a long way in religion and in the church, without really being born again. His doctrine may be pure. He may give all his time and money to the cause of the gospel. But at last, some secret wickedness may be exposed, and he may fall away. Let us make sure that this is not us. Let us not be easily convinced of our own good standing. Let us take care to "examine ourselves, whether we be in the faith" (2 Corinthians 13:5). Millions have been deceived - are we? The new birth is very real thing. It is very glorious. But what do we know of it? Let us ask Christ to show us where we really stand.

Let us see secondly in these verses *the dreadful danger of covetousness*. It was this sin which brought Simon down. It is one of the most deadly sins of all. It was the desire to be like God which ruined our parents Adam and Eve in the garden. The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10), "which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows". Saul the Pharisee had a faultless outward life, but was ruined by covetousness within (Romans

7:7-13). It is idolatry (Colossians 3:5). It is a mark of being under the dreadful anger of God (Romans 1:29). It is the fruit of a wicked heart (Mark 7:22). The Saviour particularly warned us to "take heed" of it - "for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of the things which he possesses" (Luke 12:15). It is the sin which had ensnared Simon's heart, and ruined him. There have been vast numbers who would be ashamed to be involved in open wickedness. But under the cover of "desiring to better themselves", they have hidden a deadly enemy of their own souls.

We must take care as to where our treasure is. Where are our hearts? We entered this world with nothing, and we shall leave it with nothing too. If our treasure is the Lord Jesus Christ, then we shall have riches for evermore. If our treasure is gold and silver, we shall lose it all. It is no sin to be rich, but it is ruinous to love riches more than God. We must learn, if we have food and clothing, with that to be content. Godliness with contentment is great gain (1 Timothy 6:6-10).

Acts 8:26-31

26 Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is desert. 27 So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, 28 was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go near and overtake this chariot." 30 So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him.

In the book of Acts, vast numbers of people were converted (2:41, 4:4, 5:14). But we are only told about the personal details of a small handful of them. There is a special reason which the Spirit of God had for selecting these. Either they form a special example, or they were key people in the gospel's advance. The book of Acts records the gospel's advance from the centre of Judaism to the centre of the world. But as yet, there are churches only in Judea and Samaria. There is much more to come. This Ethiopian eunuch's conversion is a sign. It is the promise of far greater things to come. He truly represented "the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The gospel is now going out even there! Let us read these words with expectancy.

Let us learn first from these words that there is nobody who is excluded from the gospel of Christ. This eunuch represents an outcast. He was excluded from the people of God. He feared the God of Israel. He had travelled a great distance to worship in Jerusalem (v27). He did not worship the idols of his own land. He had heard of and come to reverence the true God. But for all this, he could not enter the temple, or worship with God's people. He could not become a Jew, and was shut out from their privileges. The law of God forbade any eunuch from membership of Israel (Deuteronomy 23:1). What a heavy heart this man must have taken to Jerusalem and back! He could come so near;

yet he must always remain at a distance. But now all this was to change. Every person would now be invited to come. Christ's death had done away with all the ceremonies and outward rules of the Old Testament law. All things were now made pure. Nothing needed to be pictured using external things any more. Jesus Christ had come. He was the reality behind all of God's promises. Through him, all people could be made pure. The only thing that can cut us off from him is a refusal to part with sin. That is the true uncleanness. No barriers of race, culture or custom remain. Every person is invited to come to Christ. God had always promised that when Christ came, he would welcome eunuchs into his family. Those far off from Israel need not lament any more (Isaiah 56).

What a wonderful truth the eunuch's conversion displays! How much more clearly could God tell us such a thing? Nobody is excluded from Jesus Christ. He can make the foulest sinner clean. It is nothing to do with who we are. It does not matter where we were born. There are no distinctions before God. The whole human race stands on a level with him. He is not impressed by any of our good deeds. He sees the deep sin which is present in every heart. We may call one man good, and another bad. But God sees the great wickedness in all of us. And it is for all kinds of men that God has provided a Saviour. Christ's death is as necessary for one, as for all. And Christ has died for men of all kinds. Whatever we have done, there is a free offer for us. Whoever we have been, mercy is presented to us, and we are invited to come. Christ loves to save the hopeless. He was known on earth as a friend of traitors and sinners (Matthew 11:19). The more wretched a condition a person is in, the more glorious is his grace. He did not come into the world to call the righteous. He came to call sinners to repent (Matthew 9:13). We must not ask if he is willing to save us. The only question is if we are willing to be saved.

Let us secondly admire the sovereignty of God as he saves sinners. The advance of the Christian message has been planned by God. Christ himself is overseeing every part. It was not Philip who decided to preach to this eunuch. It was the Lord who told him exactly when and where to go (v26). Just at that time, there "happened" to be a man there, whom God intended to convert. And by "coincidence", he was reading the word of God. By "chance", he was studying a part which spoke particularly clearly about Christ. He did not understand. But happily he found that a man just at the right time appeared and was offering to explain to him!

There are no coincidences with God. Everything is perfectly planned. He knows all our times and our seasons. He has all things in the palm of his hand. He knows his plan for the church, and for the gospel's advance. He has chosen the people, and the times, and the places, where the gospel shall advance. Nothing has been left out of his thinking. He is infinitely wise, and infinitely powerful. And not one thing that he has purposed shall fail to come to pass.

Let us be very grateful that this is true! The church does not depend upon man. Its advance does not need man's cleverness, or schemes, or tricks. It depends all upon the sovereignty of God. Let us look to him, and increase our prayers that he may bless. Let us not lose heart, as if Satan had overcome. Let us have faith, and trust the reigning