

### **The church persecuted and scattered**

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. <sup>2</sup> Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. <sup>3</sup> But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

<sup>4</sup> Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

(Acts 8:1-4 NIV)<sup>i</sup>

### **Introduction**

The highs and the lows! The Church was growing by the thousands, God's Holy Spirit was moving among them, and many signs and wonders were being performed ministry, but they were now faced with persecution – at this time from their own people, the temple authorities.

The apostles were not unused to this having already experienced the high of Jesus' ministry but followed by the low of Jesus' death because the spirit of the world had conspired against him. They then experienced a new high period when Jesus appeared to them resurrected. When that was affirmed at Pentecost there was no stopping them!

However, Church growth also came with growing pains and after receiving complaints that some people were being left out of the widows' support network, deacons were selected to reinforce the gospel-centred care system. As it turns out, these appointments proved to be a part of how the Holy spirit was preparing Jesus' Church for his mission.

### **Godly reaction?**

The scene set for us today begins immediately after Stephen is stoned to death and a contrast is set between the godly men who buried Stephen and Saul, one of those involved, who begins to expand persecution of the Jesus followers. The apostles' reputation and defence of Jesus' divinity was such that they remained in Jerusalem, but many others were scattered.

Was this the beginning of a low period? No, those who scattered proclaimed Jesus wherever they went for Jesus was sowing the seed of the Gospel across a much wider field. They did not go out in bitterness but took courage from one another, aided by God's Spirit, to bring hope to others they met along the way.

This is often the way of the Lord, to turn hardship into hope. In this scene many followers of Jesus fled their homes becoming Internally Displaced People but, as the words of an old Psalm say,

Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.

<sup>6</sup> As they pass through the Valley of Baka, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools. <sup>7</sup> They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion. (Ps.84:5-7 NIV)

**Reflective Q:** What is our impact on those we meet? Do we bring hope or despair? Are the souls of others watered and nourished?

## **Part 2, Philip and the Holy Spirit**

<sup>5</sup> Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. <sup>6</sup> When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. <sup>7</sup> For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralysed, or lame were healed. <sup>8</sup> So there was great joy in that city. (Acts 8:5-8 NIV)

Who was Philip?

Philip was a deacon who knew Stephen well and was one of those who was selected alongside him because he too was known as a godly man. He was one of the many displaced people and he fled to Samaria.

... Of course, we don't normally use the events of deacons becoming IDP's when we are selecting deacons today! ...

Why Samaria?

Maybe he chose Samaria because the strict Jews of the time avoided the place, considering the people to have abandoned the purity of their roots because they had married outside of the Hebrew tribes. That mindset was to ignore that Moses was married to a Moabite and that King David's great-grandmother, Ruth, was also Moabite.

Jesus himself had visited Samaria and stopped at one of Jacob's wells. The woman he met there became the first evangelist.

But his business there was not done. In one of the conversations Jesus had with the disciples after his resurrection he had said to them,

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

(Acts 1:8 NIV)

That prophecy was not confined to the apostles, but to all Jesus' followers – just as Peter had spoken to the crowds at Pentecost. (see Acts 2:14-21 NIV)

So, we don't exactly know if Philip had the thought that he was less likely to be chased after he went to Samaria, but we know for certain that it was not independent thought, for he was prompted to go there by the Holy Spirit.

Philip was welcomed by the people of Samaria, who paid close attention to him and wondered at the signs performed through him by the Holy Spirit.

**Reflective Q:** How open are you to being led by the Holy Spirit? (Ask him to lead you each day, whether your circumstances are currently easy or difficult.)

### **Part 3, Simon the sorcerer & the Holy Spirit**

When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money <sup>19</sup> and said, 'Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.'

(Acts 8:18-19 NIV)

Simon was locally famous and known as the sorcerer for he used to perform signs and wonders that amazed the people in Samaria. When Philip arrived Simon was one of those who believed and was baptised by Philip.

Imagine being part of that new church in Samaria joined by this locally famous man. Perhaps he could have been heralded as a great success story from Philip's mission? A bit of kudos to that church!? They may have expected Simon to take up a similar role for the Holy Spirit especially when two of the great apostles, Peter and John, visit Samaria to see the effect of Philip's mission.

When Peter and John arrive to see that the Holy Spirit was working through Philip, that many were being baptised, but those people were not yet filled with the Holy Spirit, the first thing they do is to pray for the new believers to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

#### **Trying to buy or earn God's favour? Conversion but not transformation:**

Seeing this, Simon wants some of the action but here his heart betrays him. He offered Peter and John money so that he might buy that ability. In effect he wanted to buy God's Spirit which is to try and buy God - Shocking!

... but is it really that shocking?

As I think about events in the history of the church, I am reminded that various problems arose because people tried to buy God's favour. How quickly people forget that Jesus is a person of God, and it is not by offerings, following Jesus' moral teaching or seeking to gain God's favour in other way that God's Spirit rests in the person.

**God's Holy Spirit is shared as a gift to his people, flowing from the love and grace of Jesus to forgive sin.**

If Simon was part of our church community, what would we have done?

Would we have removed him from the members list or had a quiet word with him, 'no, no Simon, you can't buy God, but you can ask for his gift so that you too may signpost others to the Father. Be humble, and let God be first in your heart.'

I'm a pastor so I would have gone for the second option, offering a time of discipleship study to learn the ways of God.

So, let's find out how Peter answered him.

<sup>20</sup> Peter answered: 'May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! <sup>21</sup> You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. (Acts 8:20-21 NIV)

Ouch!

Peter went for the first option. But he does not close the door on Simon's restoration because Peter next tells him to repent of trying to buy God which revealed Simon was still 'full of bitterness and captive to sin' (Acts 8:23 NIV). Simon does not feel worthy and asks Peter to pray on his behalf.

We are not told if Peter did, but it seems to me that Simon needed to confess himself, perhaps supported by the apostle, rather than abdicate responsibility.

Two things to highlight:

- Sin against God is super-serious!
- However, forgiveness and reconciliation is still on offer to the one who confesses to the Lord.

### Response

#### **Psalm 51:1-2, 10-13** (NIV)

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.

<sup>2</sup>Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

<sup>11</sup>Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.

<sup>12</sup>Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

<sup>13</sup>Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you.

Note the last part: The one who is restored by and reconciled to God has a Holy-Spirit given mission to help others discover relationship, purpose and power in life through Christ. Philip personified this.

**Reflective Q's:** How can I live more mindfully, being transformed by Jesus?

How will this be shown in my interactions with God and with others?

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<sup>i</sup> Scripture references are from The Holy Bible, New International Version, Anglicised Edition (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011).