

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 20, Chapters 8 and 9

In many ways Acts chapter 8 is a significant pivot point. Up to now all the activity concerning the knowledge and spreading of the Good News of the Gospel has taken place in the city of Jerusalem, has been strictly among Jews, and the focus of events has revolved around the works of the 12 Disciples. But the sudden, horrific and unjust stoning to death of the Believer Stephen (given full legal sanction by the Sanhedrin as overseen by the High Priest Caiaphas), marked the beginning of an open persecution against the Believing community of Jews in Jerusalem.

If we step back and consider what is happening here, it is helpful to realize that this persecution was upon one particular faction of Judaism (the Jewish disciples of Messiah Yeshua) by other factions of Judaism that didn't agree with the Believer faction's **halakhah**; that is, some of the traditions and doctrines of the Believers were in disagreement with some, but not all, of the traditions and doctrines of other sects of Judaism. In fact the main point of disagreement was over the identity of the Messiah, and to a lesser degree the Messiah's nature. We're really not made aware of any other serious doctrinal disagreements (at least not up to now).

Labels are very tricky things that can on the one hand be useful, and on the other be dangerous. When we attach a label to a group or to a person, to a concept or to a doctrine it is done with the direct purpose of creating a kind communication shorthand, or perhaps a codeword of sorts. A label is designed to paint a quick, sometimes subconscious, mental image so the conversation doesn't get bogged down in details. Labels often illicit knee-jerk emotional responses. Used enough, labels become stereotypes that are near to impossible to alter or correct later on. Because most Bibles will at this point in the New Testament label the Jerusalem Believers as "Christians" or label them collectively as "the Church" then there is a false picture created of Jews lining up against Christians; or of Judaism coming into violent opposition to Christianity. And of course when we think of Christians, Christianity and the Church we think of gentiles carrying Bibles under their arms, of the sign of the Cross present everywhere, of buildings with steeples outside and neat rows of pews inside, and of Nativity Scenes and Christmas trees. But we need to erase all of these thoughts because that is not at all what we are witnessing here in the Book of Acts, at any point. It is just the Bible translators' misuse of these English labels that creates an inappropriate and historically false mental image that I want to spend a little time to straighten out.

I pointed out in prior lessons that to use the term "Church" in the Book of Acts to collectively label the followers of Yeshua is what is called an anachronism; that is, it is a term (even a concept) that didn't occur until far later in history, at least a century after the Bible was closed up. So to read the term "Church" (as we think of it today) back into the Book of Acts creates a false impression. In a couple more chapters we'll read in most English Bibles that it was in Antioch that the first use of the term "Christians" was coined. But in fact that, too, gives us the

wrong impression. In the original Greek of the New Testament the term is **christianos**, so it is easy to see how the English word Christians was created from it. But **christianos** is taken from the Greek word **Christos**. As expertly explained in the Strong's Concordance, **Christos** means anointed one and it is merely translating the Hebrew word **mashiach**, Messiah, into Greek. Thus the term Messianic means followers of Messiah. So originally whereas Messianics literally meant followers of the anointed one, so does **christianos** literally mean followers of the anointed one. So while the English word Christians is a reasonable translation, once again what comes to mind when we say Christians? Christian is a centuries old label; and when we think of Christians we subconsciously think of gentiles, crosses, churches, Christmas trees, choirs dressed in robes, and if you are Catholic you think of cathedrals, priests, the Virgin Mary and the Pope.

However the closest thing the Jewish Believers formulated as a label for themselves was The Way. Apparently other Jews referred to them at times as **Notzrim** and **Natzratim**, which translates best into English as Nazarenes, meaning people connected to Nazareth, Yeshua's hometown. The point I'm desperate to help all of my Jewish and gentile brothers and sisters in the Lord to see is that everything that is happening to this point in the Book of Acts is taking place exclusively within the Jewish community. The Synagogue and all that went with it is at the center for Yeshua's followers as it is with the other factions of Jews. The followers of Yeshua (The Way) were unique ONLY in the sense that their particular Rabbi was the crucified Yeshua who they also believed was the Messiah. But other Jewish factions didn't agree with this, so they rose up against the members of The Way.

Lest you think this sort of thing as concerns Jews and Judaism is unique to the New Testament, I assure you it is not. A large modern day Jewish sect called Chabad has gone through a painful, fairly recent, split. The leader of the Chabad Lubavitch faction was a much beloved Rabbi named Schneerson. He passed away from natural causes in 1994. But some among his faction declared him to be the Messiah, and say that he is not really dead as we commonly think of death; rather he is in hiding and sometime soon will resurface. This claim has caused a contentious split of Chabad among those who declare Schneerson as the Jewish Messiah versus the majority who don't. Using the terms we have recently learned, the split in Chabad is over **halakhah**; Traditions or Oral Torah. The Oral Torah of the main faction of Chabad says that the Messiah has not yet come; the Oral Torah teachings of the Lubavitch faction of Chabad says that the Messiah has appeared, is gone but will soon reappear, and he is Rabbi Schneerson. So I think God has given modern day Believers a very good way to better understand the background and sense of the issue that was causing the persecutions of members of The Way in Acts chapter 8, if only we'll pay attention. Again: the issue with the death of Yeshua, the death of Stephen, and now the general persecution of Believing Jews in Jerusalem was over disagreements concerning **halakhah**; Oral Torah, Traditions, doctrines.

You will notice as we move along that as fervent as the persecution of Jewish Believers was by the other Jewish factions, there was never the thought expressed that the Believers had somehow abandoned Judaism, stopped being Jews, or were forming an entire new religion. The Believers did not even isolate themselves, as did the Essenes, and the Essenes were perfectly accepted as Jews even if their brand of Judaism didn't sit all that well with most of the other brands of Judaism.

There are so many valuable lessons of application to learn from this, but I'd like to focus on just one because it is especially relevant to our time. It is that among those who call ourselves Christians or Messianics, no matter what faction or denomination, we need to display love towards one another. Because if indeed we all count on Yeshua for redemption, then we all share one Spirit; God's Spirit. That doesn't mean that we can't strongly disagree on doctrines and traditions, call one another on the carpet, leave one denomination or faction because we think they are on the wrong track, and then join another that we think is more correct. No matter which group a Believer belongs to, if they hold to Yeshua (Jesus) as the true and only Savior, and Son of God, who is Himself God, then we are brothers and sisters in the faith. We should never behave in such hateful ways towards one another like these factions of Judaism in Jerusalem did in the Book of Acts who are in such disagreement with a couple of doctrines of this Messianic Judaism faction that it breaks out into outright persecution and hatred.

I'm not speaking of tolerance; I'm speaking of love. I'm not speaking of validation of wrong theology in order to be inclusive, or compromising of principles to find a humanly comfortable middle ground. I'm speaking of our own attitude and behavior. I constantly speak out against several erroneous theological principles that are characteristic of the mainstream institutional Christianity of the 21st century, especially as regards a bent against Israel and the belief that the Torah is only for Jews. But I sure don't disagree on every point, nor do I say that those who do not believe precisely as I do are not Christians because of this disagreement. Rather my goal is to encourage my brothers and sisters in the faith (Jew and gentile) to return to the truth of God's Word and to accept it for what it says; to abandon weak manmade doctrines that are not in accordance with Scripture, and to live by God's laws and commandments that Christ says we are obligated to do, and will not change in the least until the heavens and earth pass away.

So in Acts chapter 8, we find that those Jewish followers of Yeshua who were under threat of persecution from their fellow Jews fled Jerusalem for other parts of Judea, and also to the Galilee and somewhat surprisingly to Samaria. I say "surprisingly" because the people of Samaria were seen universally by Judaism as ungodly, unclean hybrids who were neither Jew nor gentile; a people to be shunned, and a place to avoid. And for Jews of that era, even though Samaria originally formed the heartland of the Promised Land, at the moment Samaria was acknowledged as foreign and so its residents were foreigners. This is not because of any declaration by Rome, but because of a declaration by Judaism. This was because the Samaritans practiced what the Jews considered to be a perverted form of Torah-based religion, with their holiest place being Mt. Gerizim, and their Priesthood having no connection to Levites or to the Temple in Jerusalem.

Thus we find the disciple Phillip, a Hellenist Jewish Believer, going to Samaria and (once again, surprisingly) having success in bringing the Gospel to those who would seem the least likely to want to hear anything from a Jew: the Samaritans. No doubt news of this success startled the 12 Disciples in Jerusalem and probably out of skepticism they dispatched Peter and John to see for themselves. And, indeed, there were a number of Samaritans that Peter and John judged had accepted Yeshua as Savior. But then, last week, we addressed the sensitive issue of the Holy Spirit, and when and how the Holy Spirit indwells a Believer. For in Acts chapter 8 we see that even though the new Believers of Samaria had accepted Christ,

and been baptized, they had not yet received the Holy Spirit. John and Peter arrived, laid hands on these Samaritans and so the Spirit came upon them. And yet in other places in the Bible, we'll find that the sequence is faith in Christ with instantaneous indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In other passages, the Holy Spirit doesn't come until water baptism. And in yet other places the Holy Spirit comes after coming to faith but before immersion.

Intellectual honesty demands of us to not cherry pick and choose but one of these several different examples of Holy Spirit indwelling as the only legitimate one. However most denominations have indeed picked one and demands that others been seen as heresy. The lesson to take from this is that God is not formula driven. There is no precise sequence of faith, baptism, and indwelling of the Spirit that is authorized by God, or demanded by Him, with other sequences being prohibited or to be judged as not genuine. Rather it seems to be circumstance driven and somewhat flexible.

And now before we move on to the final verses of chapter 8, let's recall the issue of the Samaritan magician named ***Shimon*** (Simon in English). He, too, accepted the Gospel. However upon viewing Peter and John call down the Spirit of God into Believers, he was so impressed that he wanted to have that same ability so he offered money to the disciples to be taught how. Peter sternly rebuked him, such that some Bible commentators claim that Simon was excommunicated. There is nothing in this passage that makes any such suggestion. And any thought that Simon wasn't saved just because he didn't instantaneously drop his misguided beliefs for the true beliefs stated in God's Word, is actually the norm for most anyone at any time, including up to our modern era. We can believe long before we understand more than the most basic principles of salvation. And these deeper, and necessary understandings are to be the next step for all Believers; but it doesn't happen overnight, and it takes time and effort.

So the bottom line so far in Acts chapter 8 is that for the first time the Gospel is being taken outside of the Holy Land, and even being taken to those who don't practice Judaism, and many are coming to faith. And we also see how an ordinary disciple, Phillip, (not one of the 12 leaders) is now being focused upon as doing great miracles and bringing many of the least likely to Christ. Let's see what Phillip does next.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 8:25 to end

Peter and John teach the Samaritans about God's Word to give some firm foundation to their new faith in Messiah Yeshua and then they return to Jerusalem. Recall that this task of teaching God's Word as well as witnessing for Messiah, is what the 12 disciples agreed was their true calling and what they ought to spend all their time doing. This points up that regular congregation members (like Phillip) do not have to be Bible scholars or experts in theology to take the Good News to those who need to hear it. In fact I think that the best protocol is for the congregation to evangelize to individuals, and for the leaders to teach and mature the new Believers. Effective evangelizing is almost always one to one and relational as opposed to informational; but teaching can be (and usually is) most effective in a one-to-many environment. Why? Because God has equipped every Believer to take the Good News to non-Believers. But only some have been given the gift and responsibility of teaching.

An angel now instructs Phillip to journey back southward to the road that goes between Jerusalem and Gaza. Gaza was at one time one of the 5 major city-states of the Philistines; however it was destroyed just after 100 B.C. and was not rebuilt. So by the time of Christ Gaza was more of a general location than a specific city or town. That said in this era the water well at the ruins of Gaza was still operating, and it was one of the few water sources available before entering the Sinai desert. Very likely the road to Gaza from Jerusalem was a way to access the Via Maris trade route that more or less followed the Mediterranean Coastline. It went all the way south to Egypt, and thus when we hear of this Ethiopian eunuch that Phillip would witness to, who was on his way home, he would naturally take the Via Maris to get there.

This Ethiopian was a dignitary in the employ of the Kandake of Ethiopia; not of Candace the Queen of Ethiopia as many Bibles have it. Kandake is a title, and it denotes a particular dynasty of royalty over Ethiopia. It was a dynasty of female rulers: Queens. Ethiopia was located south of Egypt and is what the Bible calls Kush. These dark-skinned people were descendants of Ham's son Kush, thus the Biblical name for the place.

It is clear that this eunuch believed in the God of Israel, as he had been in Jerusalem to worship. In his royal chariot, he was reading the scroll of Isaiah when Phillip spotted him. It may not seem so on the surface, but there is no doubt a divine pattern is being established here, and it is interesting to me how Phillip is the one that is setting it. A eunuch is a castrated male. There were a number of reasons for this castration, but none of it had to do with any kind of punishment. Rather it prevented marriage, which kept his loyalty squarely upon the person whom he served. And it limited him to any other kind of vocation as well as marking him for life. Often removing the male genitalia was for religious purposes especially when serving a female god or ruler. We must remember that at least from a Biblical viewpoint, castration is seen as mutilation and wrong. For one thing, it means that this man will never have offspring; his bloodline will end. In the most ancient Hebrew way of thinking that means no afterlife is possible, since in some mysterious way one's afterlife is at least partially contained in his children.

But a mutilation of the genitals is also seen as an affront to life itself since fruitfulness in the form of producing offspring is not possible. Even more, a castrated man may not become an Israeli national citizen because Deuteronomy says this: ^{CJB} **Deuteronomy 23:2 "A man with crushed or damaged private parts may not enter the assembly of ADONAI.** This issue arises because a man cannot fulfill his role in the Abrahamic Covenant to reproduce; thus that man cannot be part of Israel.

As concerns the religion of the Hebrews, a castrated male is very limited in where he can worship and in which rituals he can participate. It is likely that if this eunuch was permitted to enter the Temple Mount at all, it was in the Court of the Gentiles; or more likely he was prohibited from the Temple area altogether and only came to a Synagogue. That would explain his interest in Isaiah as that was a Synagogue favorite particularly in this era. Thus there is no doubt that this Ethiopian eunuch had not converted to Judaism and become a Jew because he wouldn't have been allowed to; rather he was a God-fearer. He was a gentile who worshipped the God of Israel.

So what we see is that Phillip has been dealing with those whom Judaism customarily wanted little to do. He was dealing with outcasts and those that normative Judaism looked down upon to one degree or another; first the hated Samaritans, then a sorcerer, and now the castrated male gentile. And what did Phillip do? He brought these outcasts into the Kingdom of God. What a hope, and what a God-pattern is shown to us. There is no one low enough, broken enough, wretched or ruined enough that Yeshua cannot heal their spirit and bring them into His Kingdom. There is no heritage or race that is excluded. Submit to Christ, and God accepts us.

As is typical of Luke, he says that the Spirit (the Holy Spirit) directed Phillip to go up and join the eunuch on his chariot. Was this a voice Phillip heard, or some kind of internal unction? We're not told. But when Phillip inquires of the man what it is that he's reading, and if he understands it, it is clear that the eunuch does not. He says someone needs to explain it to him.

We're given the excerpt from Isaiah that the eunuch is reading and it is from Isaiah 53. The words of Isaiah 53 that we see quoted in Acts chapter 8 more resemble the Greek Septuagint version rather than the Hebrew Tanakh version. This would make sense since few outside of the Holy Land could read or speak Hebrew; however Greek was widely known. And of course this is a Messianic prophecy that the eunuch is reading, which would be most difficult to grasp if one had not grown up in a Jewish culture. But even then, the Synagogues had various interpretations of its meaning, the most accepted being that this suffering servant who was humiliated and denied justice was referring to Israel as a whole and not to an individual.

Acts 8:32-33 CJB

³² ***"He was like a sheep led to be slaughtered; like a lamb silent before the shearer, he does not open his mouth.***

³³ ***He was humiliated and denied justice. Who will tell about his descendants, since his life has been taken from the earth?"***

The eunuch sees that the plain reading of this passage indicates an individual so he wonders if Isaiah is speaking about himself or is it someone else? This gave Phillip the opening he needed. He of course informed the man that this was speaking of Messiah Yeshua and he explained the matter and the Ethiopian believed.

It is the Ethiopian, not Philip that seems to raise the issue of immersion. The eunuch obviously had spent sufficient time among Jews and studying the Bible that he was familiar with the mikveh and immersion in water. The way the eunuch asks the question is like this: "Is there anything that should **prevent** me from being immersed?" This no doubt was something he had run into before due to his condition of being castrated and being gentile; it may well be that he had not been allowed to immerse and was wondering if now he could.

Where they found the water to immerse we don't know. But wherever it was it met the requirement of it being Living Water (meaning the source of the water had to be water that moved, like the ocean, a river, or a spring). And since Phillip and the eunuch entered the water

together the source was of reasonable size. Upon immersion of the unnamed eunuch, we are told that Phillip was suddenly snatched away, his job here completed. The Greek word used for snatched away is **harpazo**, the same word we find in 1Thessalonians 4 that speaks of Believers being caught up into the air to meet Christ in the clouds. So what happened here was a miraculous and unexpected act of God; Phillip didn't just quickly leave the scene on his own. Phillip suddenly finds himself in Ashdod near the Mediterranean Sea. There he continues to proclaim the Good News and journeys town by town northward about 50 miles to Caesarea (this is speaking of Caesarea Maritima), which was an impressive and bustling port city that had been greatly improved by King Herod. There he would have met people from every sort of nationality and religion.

Let's move on to Acts chapter 9.

READ ACTS CHAPTER 9 all

After our being briefly introduced to Paul at the end of chapter 7, the story now turns back to him in chapter 9 and he becomes the focus. I said in the introduction to the Book of Acts that it is critical that because almost all Church doctrine comes from Paul, so we must learn who Paul is before we are properly equipped to read and decipher his God-inspired letters. And that while his Epistles like Galatians, Romans, Corinthians and so on indeed give us Paul's theology, they don't tell us who he is, why he thinks like he does, and most importantly what his terms mean to him. We'll find that information only in the Book of Acts. And without that and some other information about Synagogues and Judaism in general, it is not possible to correctly interpret much of what Paul says. And what we find is that he is a Diaspora Jew born in Tarsus of Cilicia. Paul was of the tribe of Benjamin, a tribe that Judah had centuries earlier absorbed and so those of Benjamin were called by the same name as those of the tribe of Judah: Jews. But it is also interesting to note how after all this time, at least some Jews continued to also identify with their original tribal family heritage even when they lived outside of the Holy Land.

So while I've spoken on Paul before, let's review a little and I'm going to add more information. The 2 names he goes by in the New Testament are Paul and Saul, or more correctly **Sha'ul**, the same name of the 1st king of Israel who was from Paul's tribe of Benjamin, King Sha'ul. Paul is Latin, **Sha'ul** is Hebrew. Since Latin and Greek were the primary languages of the Roman Empire, then it is not surprising that Paul would have an alternative Roman name. What we can be sure of is that his given name was **Sha'ul** and not Paul because in Acts 13 we read: ⁹ **"Then Sha'ul, also known as Paul, filled with the Ruach HaKodesh...."** So Paul was an assumed name that he used sometimes because it more fit his life as a Diaspora Jew.

Paul's hometown of Tarsus was quite large: around ½ million population. It had a sizeable Jewish community with many Synagogues. Paul's first language was Greek, but he also spoke Hebrew and Aramaic because Hebrew and Aramaic were similar and it was typical of highly educated Jewish scholars to know both languages since the many Jewish religious documents contained both Aramaic and Hebrew script. The Church Father Jerome, who lived in the late 4th and early 5th centuries A.D. claims that Paul's family lived for a time in **Gush**

Chalav in the Galilee; but as the result of war they migrated to Tarsus where Paul was born.

Paul specifically says that he was born into Roman citizenship, something that was not usual for Diaspora Jews. So his father was a Roman citizen by some means. Since Paul will use that Roman citizenship to his advantage let's see just what that bought him. First, the benefits of being a Roman citizen covered virtually every aspect of life. Everything from judicial sentences to tax penalties was less for citizens than for non-citizens. Class also mattered; the higher classes of Roman citizens used different courts than the lower classes, and the higher classes were more or less presumed innocent while the lower classes were generally presumed guilty. It seems pretty clear from what we read of Paul's encounter with the court system that he knew his way around the judiciary, and could demand an audience with a king or very high Roman official to personally look at his case. There is little doubt that Paul's family had status.

As Rabbi Joseph Shulam cleverly observes, one of the most enviable rights that a Roman citizen had that others didn't was the right to appeal a court decision. Further a citizen was protected against unjust private or public arrest, and he couldn't be punished, tortured, incarcerated or executed by local judicial authorities. Thus we see that when Paul was arrested for speaking the Gospel he was eventually taken to the highest authority in Rome when he lets it be known that he is a Roman citizen and demands his rights. Paul was used to privilege in his life, and it didn't end when he became an Apostle.

Paul was a Pharisee because Paul's family was a family of Pharisees; something rare outside of the Holy Land. However if his family had migrated some years earlier from Galilee to Tarsus as Jerome claims, then joining the party of the Pharisees while in the Galilee and then continuing to consider themselves as practicing Pharisees even while living in the Diaspora makes more sense.

There is more that we need to understand about Paul the person, and I want to take all the time needed, so we'll stop here and continue next time.