

The Church: DEFINED

Study Questions

Week 13

Our human nature is to avoid pain whenever possible. We generally seek a path of least resistance on our way to a goal or destination. Who looks forward to great trials or distress? In spite of our tendency to find an easy path, we know that God often uses trials and difficulties as opportunities. Stephen's martyrdom was a trial that shook the early church; however, it was also a turning point for mission. Just when things looked ominous, the gospel advanced in a whole new direction. Again, we remember Jesus' words: "...and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea *and Samaria*..." (Acts 1:8)

MAIN TEXT: Acts 8:1-25

CONNECT & OBSERVE

1. What did you find most significant from Sunday's sermon?
2. Read the passage in Acts. What questions come to mind as you consider these verses?

LEARN

3. Verses 1-3 paint a bleak picture. What does verse 4 tell us about the mindset of those who were scattered? Commentators point out how "it is a natural thing for wandering Christians to spread the word of the gospel."¹
4. In verses 4-13, Philip (refer back to 6:5) goes to Samaria—a place despised by Jews. Contrast the messages of Philip (v. 5) and Simon (v. 9).
5. Read verses 14-25. Why do you think it was important for the apostles, represented by Peter and John, to go to Samaria to see first-hand what was happening there?
6. A natural question from this passage is why "the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen on any of them" (v. 16) even after the Samaritans believed and were baptized. What purpose do you think this "delay" served?²

¹ Darrell Bock referring to I. H. Marshall in Acts, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 320

² Commentators propose that the Spirit came with the apostles' laying on of hands so that they would know first-hand that God had incorporated the Samaritans into the body of believers alongside the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. Also, this "two-step" pattern is not normative, but seems to be a mark of God's activity when a new movement is beginning.

7. Another question relates to Simon's belief. The text says "Even Simon himself believed" (v. 13), but soon after that his "heart is not right before God" (v. 21). What do you make of Simon's belief?³

APPLY

8. Imagine the fear that must have assaulted the minds of those who just witnessed the stoning of Stephen! They fled Jerusalem, yet they continued to proclaim the gospel. What can we learn from their example?

9. Simon sought to control and profit from God's power rather than to be subject to it. Can something like this happen in our day? If so, talk about an example or two. How do we guard against it ourselves?

10. Distress and persecution in Jerusalem led to a new outgrowth of ministry as the believers were committed to proclaim the gospel wherever they went. As we face our own form of distress with COVID-19, what opportunities are we or should we be taking to continue to proclaim the gospel?

11. If you haven't already, share your needs with each other and take time to pray together. Remember that the same Spirit who was powerfully at work in Acts is the same Spirit that is present with us today!

³ The underlying issue is tragically complex. Who knows Simon's heart but God? Bock asks "Is the attachment Simon has to Philip a sincere attachment to the gift of God or a quest to enhance his personal power?" Later, Bock suggests, "If Simon were obedient, he would pray for himself and ask Peter to pray for him. Read in this light, his request to Peter is seen as dismissive. Peter can pray, but Simon will not. Perhaps the account concludes in an open-ended manner to allow the reader to ponder the proper response. The key to the text is the warning that Simon has been headed in a wrong direction, and so his example is primarily negative, no matter how the question of Simon's fate in Acts is ultimately resolved."