

Acts 8 Exegetical Meditation



Acts 8 follows St Philip the Evangelist evangelical work in Samaria. This is not to be confused with St Philip the Apostle. This Philip was one of the seven deacons ordained in Jerusalem alongside St Stephen back in Acts 6.

Acts 8 Breakdown:

St Stephen's funeral contrasted with Saul's persecution of Christians- 8:1-4

Philip preaches, works miracles, baptizes many in Samaria- 8:5-13

Peter and John confirm Samaritans and Simon the Magician is rebuked- 8:14-25

Philip evangelizes, catechizes, and baptizes an Ethiopian Eunuch- 8:26-40

The chapter begins with an announcement of a great persecution of Christians in Jerusalem after St Stephen's killing. As seen in Chapter 7, a sharp contrast is made between Stephen and Saul. Saul is held up as the anti-Stephen in Acts 7, and now immediately after the mentioning of Stephen's burial, Saul is described as the prototype of Christian murderers (see Acts 8:2-3). On account Saul's team of assassins, all of the disciples (besides the Apostles) disperse throughout Judea and Samaria.

St Philip the Evangelist comes to the city of Samaria and amazes with his preaching, healings, and works of miracles in the name of Christ. The text states that the multitude listened to him with "one accord" (Acts 8:6). This theme of paying attention is seen throughout the book of Acts. St Luke constantly uses it to communicate that the gospel has captivating power over false doctrines. This is blatantly apparent in this story. St Philip comes to town and usurps Simon the Magician's works and teachings (see Acts 8:12). Even though in modern times there are many temptations towards synchronism and blending the gospel with other religions, it is obvious in this story and throughout the Acts of the Apostles that the gospel cannot be blended with Gnosticism or magic of any kind. The audiences sharp turn away from Simon to Philip communicates this, and Simon's own baptism does as well. Simon intuitively recognized that the gospel cannot coexist with false teachings in the individual soul.

As we have seen numerous times thus far, Peter and John are paired together. They come to Samaria to confirm the new believers. Clearly, we can see from the beginnings of the Church, that baptism was possible for deacons (or priests) but the anointing of the Holy Spirit at confirmation was reserved for the bishops (the

Apostles) to give (see Acts 8:15-17). Simon the Magician, drunk with envy asks Peter and John if he can buy the ability to have the power to confirm like they have (This is where we get the term “simony”). Peter and John rebuke him strongly for his heart defect, which he most certainly had degenerated into for his years of practicing magic. Notice that St Peter in his rebuke does not say necessarily that he will be forgiven such a grave sin as he just committed. He says, “Repent of this wickedness of yours” and “if possible” you could be forgiven (Acts 8:22). Essentially, Peter declares that Simon must do penance and awaken contrition, and even then, only perhaps God will forgive him. This has been interpreted throughout the Tradition as Simon performing a sin against the Holy Spirit, the only unforgivable sin. In fact, it seems that he was not forgiven. Though it appears like Simon is sorrowful for his sin (see Acts 8:24), history tells otherwise. Simon the magician never did have a conversion. He became a staunch opponent against Christians and has been called the “father of heretics” by St Justin Martyr and St Irenaeus. This further proves the point that the gospel cannot coexist with worldly spirits and lifeless and godless philosophies.

Acts 8:26-40 finds St Philip leave Samaria and travel to Gaza. On his way he encounters an Ethiopian Eunuch. This Eunuch is praying through the Scripture when the Holy Spirit told Philip to approach him and introduce him to Jesus and his fulfillment of the Scriptures. This scene is eerily similar to Jesus’s encounter with the disciples on the road to Emmaus in the gospel of Luke chapter 24. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus, unrecognizable due to his resurrected bodily appearance, opens the Scriptures to the two disciples and catechizes them. He shows how He fulfilled the Law and the prophets. He ultimately reveals His true identity to the two after He vanishes after He celebrates the Eucharist with them (see Lk 24:30-32). In Acts 8, the Ethiopian reveals how he is confused about how to understand the Scriptures, suggesting that without instruction it is impossible to interpret it correctly. St Philip catechizes him, and the Ethiopian progressively believes in Christ. At the end of the scene, the Eunuch desires to receive baptism and St Philip baptizes him and vanishes akin to how Jesus did at Emmaus.