

Study on Acts no.6

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 May 1985

Preacher: Rev Murdo Alex Macleod

[0 : 0 0] that he represented was a doom to failure. The death of Stephen and the resulting persecution only contributed really to the extension of the Gospel and of the Christian Church.

Persecution never destroys a cause, it only helps to scatter it. And that's why we read at the beginning of chapter 8 that there was great persecution against the church of Jerusalem and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.

And in verse 4, therefore they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word. And therefore we see the force of what has been said that it is always dangerous to scatter the disciples of Jesus Christ.

These men became triumphant missionaries of the cross. And in trying to remove the church from Jerusalem, the enemies of the Christian Church only succeeded in giving that church to the world at large.

I think it was Alexander McLaren, the minister who used to be in the last century in Manchester in England, who said that what these persecutions of the church did then was akin to someone trying to to overturn a burning lamp.

[1 : 3 9] And all that they tried to do, all that they succeeded in doing was really in spilling the oil which blazed, which went aflame wherever it penetrated.

And that was the way with the Christian Church. And from this point onwards, in chapter 8 of the Book of Acts, the story of the extension of the Christian Church proceeds, as someone has put it, in ever-widening circles.

And it revolves around three men in particular. Philip, Peter, and Paul. And tonight we look at this man, Philip, and at his activities, first of all in Samaria, and secondly in the desert.

Now, this man, Philip the Evangelist, who was one of the seven deacons appointed by the Church of Jerusalem to look after the distribution of the common fund that they had there to relieve the poor and particularly the widows, this man is quite unique in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles.

He seems to remind you, I think, very strongly of the likes of Elijah and Elisha in the Old Testament. Because one moment the Spirit of God directs him to this place, and the next moment he directs him somewhere else.

[2 : 5 9] And then he vanishes from the scene just as suddenly as he bursts upon it. Here we see him going down to Samaria. Now, this in itself was quite a feat for this man.

The Samaritans, as you know, were a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, Jewish people who had integrated with the Gentiles, and they had produced this nation. Now, way back in the history of Israel, the nation which were called Samaritans.

You know that the Jews absolutely detested the Samaritans. The Samaritans rejected most of the Old Testament. They believed in the first five books of Moses.

They rejected the rest of the Old Testament. They didn't worship in Jerusalem. Indeed, they were never allowed to worship in Jerusalem. And they were a people who nevertheless expected a Messiah of sorts.

You remember what the woman of Samaria said to Jesus when he spoke to her at the well? We know, she said, that when Messiah is come, they expected the coming Messiah.

[4 : 11] But they were considered by the Jews as outcasts from society. The Jews had no time for people who didn't belong to their own race.

You remember how clearly this comes to light in the history of Jonah, who was sent by God to the Gentile nation of Nineveh, and because of his adherence to his own religion and his fierce nationalism, he ran away from the task.

Well, Philip didn't. It seems as though the Spirit of God directed this man somehow to Samaria.

And it shows you how big-hearted he was. It shows you the vision that he had for the Christian church. And when he got there, he preached the gospel.

He, like everyone else, he preached Christ unto them. The word preached in verse 5 there is the word which is very often used in the New Testament after this, a herald proclaiming a message.

[5 : 16] And this gospel was accompanied with great success in Samaria. In other words, there was a revival of religion in Samaria.

Many, many people were converted. And many unclean spirits were cast out of people. And many people with pulses and many people were lame were healed.

And there was great joy in that city. And the preaching of the gospel was attended by miracles, which were performed probably by Philip and by his followers in Samaria.

Now, that was what happened. There was a great revival of religion. But here in Samaria, something else happened.

The Christian church, through the apostles, came into contact with magic. A very interesting and widespread feature of the life of the times.

[6 : 19] And this magic was practiced in Samaria, largely through Simon. And you know that this man is sometimes called Simon Magus.

And the word Magus is derived as akin to the word Magician. Simon, the Magician. Well, they came in contact with this practice and with this man in Samaria.

And the Christian church has been coming in contact with this kind of thing ever since. Because human nature, some or other, seems to demand that there be some contact with the world beyond.

There be some contact with the world of spirits and with the world of the unknown. I'm sure that there are many of you here tonight, and perhaps the young people particularly.

And maybe when you buy a newspaper or a magazine, the first page will turn up as the one which tells about the horoscopes. You want to read the stars.

[7 : 29] And you want to find out what this particular person is saying about you under your own star. Many people are taken up with the early morning breakfast television shows.

And the hold that people who engage in this practice have upon the minds of people. And you know that I wouldn't be surprised if some of you here tonight may have found yourselves quite unconsciously coming under this particular power.

Under this sway. There's something in the nature of man that demands that there be something that he doesn't know about himself for tomorrow revealed to him.

Well, this man seemed to have practiced some kind of magical art akin to that. He was, as we read here in verse 9, he was in the same city.

He used sorcery. He bewitched the people of Samaria. That was he hypnotized them. He had them under his sway. That's the meaning of the word bewitched. A power can be brought to bear upon a people and they're absolutely dominated by what that person says.

[8 : 43] And he was giving out that himself was some great one to whom they all gave heed from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God and to whom they regard because at a long time he had bewitched them with sorceries.

Sorceries. Now, it's difficult really to understand exactly the power that this person did have. But it's obvious that he was some kind of leader of the people, perhaps some kind of religious people, who claimed to have power over their minds and over their bodies.

And who claimed to exercise or to liberate them from the power that had taken hold of them.

He claimed to lead these people into a higher kind of spiritual living, a higher plane of spiritual living. The one in whom the power of God for them resided.

Well, you know, I don't think that we should ever lose sight of this, that there are some people who hold a tremendous influence, who have a tremendous hold over the lives of people.

[10 : 06] Men who set themselves up in the place of God. Some of you may not remember this. Many people in the church do remember that the pop group, the Beatles, when they were riding high in the popularity charts, they themselves claimed to be more popular than Jesus Christ.

And to an extent, there was an element of truth in the claim. It's amazing the kind of person who will dominate your thinking.

The kind of person whose philosophy of life, if they have a philosophy, whose outlook on life, whose emphasis, will so mold you thinking that day or night, you think of no one else but that person.

Well, that was the kind of hold that this man Simon had over the majority of people in Samaria until something happened. This man, Philip, the evangelist, came into this place and began to preach the gospel.

And the power of the gospel in the hand of the spirit was so evident that the people turned to the gospel in droves and they left Simon and his sorcery.

[11 : 36] They left Simon and his own special brand of magic and they turned and they gave themselves to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We read here in verse 6 to 8 that they heard the gospel, they received the gospel, they believed the gospel, it was blessed to them and miracles were performed in their midst.

And to all these purposes, this man Simon himself was converted because he himself, we read here in verse 13, believed and was baptized and he continued with Philip and wondered.

And I think this is the important part of this in verse 13, beholding the miracles and the signs which were done. There was something unreal about this man's belief, about his attachment to the cause of Christ.

You see, he was concerned only with what he was seeing, the scriptum, what was being done in the name of Christ, the miracles of healing.

He had never done this. There were people speaking in tongues. This was one of the other miracles that were performed in those days. There were people who had miraculous powers of faith. There were people who had wonderful powers of prophecy.

[12 : 56] And he had never seen this before to such an extent. And he was absolutely taken up with these things and so he associated himself with them. He joined the bandwagon. And very often this can happen.

People join the bandwagon just because they see things in other people. I've spoken about this already here. It happens in religious circles as well. It happens at times of revival.

You yourselves know when the revival is at the area of South Locks and Lewis and Carnoway and the West Side and Point and other places. You know that there were people who associate themselves with the Christian religion then.

But when the time of testing came, they fell away. Well, this is what happened to Simon. He joined the group. But his faith was soon to be tested and was tested in a very wonderful way.

In Jerusalem, Peter and John, who were the pillars of the Christian church, heard about the revival in Samaria. And so, we read here that they came down to investigate, to see what had happened in Samaria.

[14 : 08] Samaria. Now, I just want to read to you. You don't need to turn it up. I'll read it myself. I want to read to you something that was said about, something that Peter and John said many years before this about Samaria.

While Jesus was with them in the world, he, it came to pass that just before his death he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers before his face and they entered into a village of the Samaritans and told them to make ready for him.

And they didn't receive him. The Samaritans wouldn't have him. Because his face was as though he would go to Jerusalem. You see, they had no time for him because this was the place he was making for him and they wouldn't go to Jerusalem.

And when his disciples James and John saw this, they said, it was John who said it, Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?

even as he lied at it. But he turned and rebuked them and said, you know not what manner of spirit you are of? For the son of man has come not to destroy men's lives but to save them.

[15 : 17] Now then, a few years before this time they had been quite prepared to call fire down from heaven to destroy Samaria. What happens now?

Well now. When the apostles were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God they sent Peter and John up there. Peter, one of the men who had wanted fire to come down and destroy them.

Who when they were come down prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Ghost. They laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Ghost. But Simon saw that. He offered them money saying, give me also this power that in whomsoever I lay hands he may receive the Holy Ghost.

Now this is a very interesting passage and I don't want to give too much of your time here tonight with it. This isn't the place really to deal with a passage like this but just to mention it in the passage. You see, for those of you who are interested in theological discussion or interested in the application of truth to the lives of people there's a real problem that crops up here.

It's this. How could the Samaritans have been converted if they hadn't received the Holy Ghost? The Holy Spirit? Because we all know that no person can be converted without the Holy Spirit.

[16 : 33] What then is meant by saying that they hadn't yet received the Holy Ghost? They were only baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Well, what is meant is this? First of all, of course the Holy Spirit was present with them otherwise they would never have been converted.

It's the Holy Spirit who always blesses the Gospel in the conversion of an individual. As I've seen a minute in the case of the Ethiopian you know. The Spirit was there.

But the Spirit wasn't present with them in his miraculous power, that is, in the church in Samaria. He was present with the apostles in that way but not in the church in Samaria.

And in that sense he hadn't yet fallen upon them with his own miraculous gifts, the gifts that were attendant upon his ministry at that time.

And so when the apostles came they laid their hands upon them and through the laying on of the hands the Holy Spirit came in a miraculous way. He fell upon them as he fell upon the disciples at Pentecost.

[17 : 40] I think that's what it's meant. But this is what's interesting. When Simon the magician saw this then his faith for what it was was brought to the surface.

And he proved then that he didn't have the inner reality of the power of God in his life. He had an interest in the gospel. He had an interest in religion.

But he didn't have it in himself. He didn't have it it hadn't affected his life. It hadn't changed or moulded his thinking.

all he was concerned about was this gain for himself and he saw now if I had the power to do this myself if I could only lay my hands on someone and the Holy Spirit would fall upon them look at what that would mean for me.

So he offered them money for this gift. But Peter saw through him. He saw that this man had no idea of the inwardness of the Christian faith.

[18 : 51] He saw that his life was distorted by selfishness. The gospel hadn't touched his heart and it hadn't moulded his thinking and therefore he says to him your money perish with yourself in perdition.

There's no room for you in this apostolic fellowship or movement. As someone put it magic seeks to gain control of supernatural powers by external means.

Christianity demands purity of heart and it brings before the mind of the individual the gracious and the mysterious will of God and he wants to mould himself into that pattern.

But Simon didn't want to do that. Peter says to him you're a cause of bitterness to yourself you'll be a cause of corruption to others you'll have no power to pray in this moment at all.

Then answered Simon and said pray ye says to the Lord for me that none of these things that you have spoken of come upon you. Pray said that I won't be a cause of bitterness to myself pray that I won't be a cause of corruption to anybody else pray for me but I don't think that we have any reason to believe that there was anything genuine in the prayer that Simon in the request it's possible to say these things and to have nothing of real repentance and of inward change of heart you know that it's terrible how often people say this pray for me and they don't really mean it they may have some idea at the back of their mind as to what they expect you to do go through the motions you visit people at home you visit people in hospital pray for me you meet people on the street you speak to people on the phone pray for me but do you really mean it that's a great question and I don't think that Simon really meant this at all it didn't arise from any inward desire in his own heart to have his life changed as a result of the prayer being answered and it is almost a relief that you pass on to notice this other second part of the chapter where another man is brought before us whose attitude to things of

[21 : 13] God was very different the Philippian you know and when you consider when you look at this second thing from verse 26 to the end of the chapter you find that very many interesting and I think encouraging things are brought before us in the chapter he was from Ethiopia of course we've heard a lot about this land today it doesn't necessarily mean that the Ethiopia of that day was the Ethiopia of this day but it was in the region of the Ethiopia that we know of that's where he came from therefore he was a colored man he was a black man he was a you know and it's difficult to determine whether this was the type of man who wasn't capable naturally of fathering children or does it mean that he was a man of great position would it hear that he had the charge of all the queen's treasury that was the chancellor of the exchequer in

Ethiopia he wasn't a criminal like the Philippian jailer nor indeed like Saul of Tarsus nor was he a criminal like the thief on the cross all of whom were saved by the grace of God rather he was a kind of devout seeker a highly principled man who was looking for something he didn't have spiritually but he was ignorant of the way of salvation and he was the first heathen man as far as we know who was gathered into the Christian church by the power of God and by the ministry of the apostle now I think that the Ethiopian you know in his attitude to the things of God is very like many people in our own land and particularly in our own congregation in what way well let's look at them first of all we read that in verse 27 that he was a he had come to

Jerusalem to worship God now Ethiopia was a thousand miles from Jerusalem and Ethiopia was a heathen country this man had been brought up in heathenism and how we don't know this but somehow or other he had become a proselyte that was he had become a convert to Judaism to the religion of the Jews and it was for that reason that he was in Jerusalem and in Jerusalem he had access to the truth about God the Jewish scriptures presented to all and sundry who catered them the one through God and so he had access to that that was a privilege that he had and therefore he was a believer in the existence of God he was thirdly a reader of the scriptures as he sat in his chariot that day going back to Ethiopia travelling a thousand miles he had a copy of the

Old Testament or at least of a section of the Old Testament as you know the Bible in those days was the Old Testament and the Old Testament was written in scroll form if you wanted to buy a Bible in those days or a portion of scriptures you had to acquire it in a roll and you opened up the roll and you read the Bible you read the scriptures that role and he had a role which incorporated the prophecy of Isaiah chapter 53 and he was therefore a reader of the scriptures he was fourthly an attender at the services at which the Jewish religion was practiced in Jerusalem he was fifthly a man of prayer because prayer was part of the worship service of the Jews and he was sixthly a seeker he was looking for something he was a man of great humility a man of great devotion a man of great desire and he was of a teachable disposition he wanted to learn and the interesting thing is that as he

Philip comes across this man this chariot he's sitting there reading aloud he heard him verse 30 read the prophecy of Isaiah and Philip ran up the chariot and climbed in now this is the way in which they read in the old days they read aloud some of you have children who are learning perhaps verses off by heart for the Sabbath school and the best way of learning and off by heart is reading it aloud saying it to yourself and then saying it to somebody else Psalm 1 speaks of this this is the man who's blessed the man who meditates on the law of God day and night that's the way they did it in those days they read out aloud and this man was reading it aloud to himself when Philip drew near now I think there are many people like this perhaps in our own church here tonight people who are looking for something you might not know what it is but there's something you're looking for and that's why you come to church and I may say that I would harbor hopes for anybody who's a regular attender upon the means of grace a person who's who comes to church on a regular basis

[27 : 07] I think there's hope of salvation for a person like that because at least there are things you can say about that person they've got the bible they hear the word of god preached they are led in prayer by other people and they are like a like Zacchaeus who was in the way of salvation when Jesus passed by they're in the place where god ordinarily speaks to people and perhaps you may be here tonight and you've acquired a copy of the bible yourself you've acquired a copy of it maybe even you were given a bible for all I know you may have started reading it you might not be getting any good out of it so you think you don't know what you're looking for perhaps you don't even know where to start reading but at least you're reading it and maybe you're saying to yourself that you wish that someone would direct you and tell you where you should start to read the bible but at least you're reading it and then maybe you're here tonight and you never used to come to church and you've started coming to church perhaps you don't know why but you're coming mind you as you sit in church perhaps you're not engaged in the best things for all I know it always bothers me that there are some areas of this church where I can't see there are some people sitting in certain seats and I find it difficult to see them and maybe they find it difficult to see me and I know fine that there may be young people particularly in church who come and perhaps for all I know they may be having a carry on in church and there may be annoying people around them but at least you're in church

I don't condone any activity that you have like that in church I despise it but I'm glad that you're in the church because you never know what God is going to say to you in the church and you're not the first person who sat laughing at other people in church and God converted the person who was laughing at the other but at least you're there and in that sense you're seeking you've got a Bible you're hearing what's being said you may not understand it neither did this man he was reading it but as he said himself he didn't know what was being said he said to Philip how can I understand what I'm reading unless someone help me unless someone interpret it for me and unless someone tell me what it means who is this man he says and I say are speaking about is he speaking about himself or is he speaking about somebody else maybe you like that as you read the

Bible wondering if you'll ever come to understand it well this man was converted in a wonderful way and I just want before I close to tell you how it happened the angel of the Lord said to Philip you go away from Samaria to the desert now that in itself was significant you know that you've heard it said marriages are made in heaven you ever heard that well here was a marriage that was made in heaven the angel of the Lord said to Philip you leave Samaria and go off to the desert and when he got to the desert the spirit said to

Philip you go now and speak to this man now here are two men brought together so that one of them will become a convert to Jesus Christ will become in the best possible way spiritually married to the Lord Jesus Christ and notice first of all the place that the spirit of God had in this the spirit in a wonderful way directing this man to go to another place let me say this never become so rationalistic in your Christianity humanity that you deny the power of God a place in your life it's possible even in 1984 for the spirit of God to direct you in a wonderful way to speak to somebody else and to direct you in such a way that you know it is the spirit of God who's directing you that's the first thing

I say and the next thing is this isn't it wonderful that God knows better than any one of us what to do with each one of us here was a man Philip preaching away day and night in a place where the spirit of God was present in wonderful reviving power here was a man who was being used mightily for the conversion of hundreds of people and God says to him off you go off you go the very height of his usefulness you wouldn't have said that and I wouldn't have said it leave this man where he is but you see we bless God that no one of us is the director of the Christian church that no one of us is the great bishop in the Christian church on earth our ways are not his ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts he works in his own wonderful way his own wonders to perform and so he sent Peter

[33 : 21] Philip to the desert to meet one man one man and this is another lesson we have here this is the third thing the importance of the one man in the eyes of God the importance of one one person and he was directed then to meet this man oh how important meetings are in this world as partings are important how important can you look back in your own life may I ask you tonight can you look back in your own life and thank God that you met someone who spoke to you about the Lord Jesus Christ that you heard someone preaching to you the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ that you met someone who explained to you what this passage means in the word of God can you look back on that well this Ethiopian was going to do that he was a man who had failed in his search

Jerusalem but he had persevered and God met him in the desert of all places in the desert how strange God's workings are and he spoke to him and this is what I want to emphasize before I close in verse 35 when Philip asked this man do you understand what you're reading no he said I don't know what I'm talking about here when he reads when he says that he was led as a sheep to a sloth like a lamb dumb before his shearer he opened on his mouth in his humiliation his judgment was taken away and who should declare his generation for his life is taken from the earth who's he speaking about and Philip opened his mouth and began at the same scripture and preached unto him Jesus Jesus in other words he told the Ethiopian all that passage is about Jesus Christ and he would have told him this why Jesus had to suffer in the world why he had to come into the world why he had to die why he had to be raised from the dead why he ascended up the right hand of God he told him that

Jesus was sent by God to be the saviour of the world but that's not all he pressed home the point and this is what is meant by he preached Jesus unto him he presented Christ to him as his only hope of salvation he pressed it home he applied it to his heart and he commended Jesus Christ to him and he showed him in the Bible the relevance of Christ as a saviour of sinners and the man saw what he had never seen before he understood what he had never understood before this is what happened to him when he was converted and I say this to you without fear of contradiction this is what happens in every single case of conversion the understanding of the individual is enlightened and he comes to see what he never saw before

I'm not saying that it happens suddenly there is the gradual dawning and the gradual realization in the heart that the Christ who has been read about in the Bible all the time is the Christ who is the only salvation as they went on their way it's obvious that this man came to a state of faith and Philip said to him do you believe he said with all your heart and he said I believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God and as I said this is always what happens and if I may address myself again to you here tonight the people to whom I was speaking about earlier those of you who are looking for something that you don't have you begin to look for something you begin to read your Bible you begin to pray you're coming to church but this great change hasn't yet taken place in your life let me say this to you that what you need is the conviction in your own heart that

Jesus is the son of God what does that mean it means together with other things that this Christ is your prophet your priest and your king the one who can reveal your need to you the one who can show you himself the one who can teach you the one who can direct you to himself as a savior and the one who can rule your life this is what you need you need to understand all these things and maybe and I wouldn't be surprised if there are some people here tonight in whose consciousness these things are beginning to dawn the jigsaw puzzle is beginning to fit in this piece is beginning to fit into the next piece and the relevance of all this is beginning to hit you and is beginning to appeal to you but as yet you haven't reached a place of safety and here

[39 : 26] I leave it there is only one place of safety for you it is the Jesus whom Philip preached to this man and as I said this is always what happens people are brought to understand Jesus Christ as a saviour now I've told this story already in the pulpit but it crossed my mind again this afternoon and I think I should tell you again just in case you may have forgotten it I'm sure I told it here something I heard as a young Christian many years ago at a fellowship meeting at back and the two men who spoke that day are no longer in this world they are now together in glory and I was really struck by what they said there was an old old elder from Shabbos who spoke to the question that day and he told how the Lord converted him

I went into a church in Glasgow he said when I was an apprentice this was after the first world war I went into a church in Glasgow he said because I had heard one of my mates had been converted and I went in there that night to laugh at him and you know he said I came out a converted man God changed my life and the next man spoke to the question and this is what I couldn't get over the next man who spoke to the question said this well he said I can't get over what my brother said before me and I think he said the number of times I went into the same church seeking the Lord and I felt I came out of it the way I went into it but he said the day came when the Lord showed himself to me now there you have it there was one man he wasn't to all intents and purposes he wasn't seeking the

Lord when he went in there but the Lord changed his life and this is what you hear so many people saying oh here am I and I've been looking or seeking for something for years and years and I hear about someone else and as far as I know they never sought the Lord something happens and all of a sudden they're converted and it seems as though they sink into an element of despair themselves why is it that that person who as far as I know wasn't seeking the Lord has converted and here am I I'm looking and I still haven't got what I'm looking for well I would like to answer that objection it's not an objection really but it seems to be almost a complaint that these people have against the almighty because he's not saving them let me say this to you however certain a conversion may seem to be I don't believe myself that some people may not agree with this but I don't believe that anyone is converted without praying for conversion without seeking the Lord and without finding the

Lord in the gospel ah you say what about these people who are suddenly converted ah wait a minute what happened these people was this suddenly their lives were they were their conscience was awakened what do they do they were awakened to pray to seek and to read and it was far more sudden in their lives than it has been in usual but the point is this they cried to God no matter how suddenly they did it they cried and he heard and that's the same with everyone who seeks the Lord they cry and he hears the Lord isn't going to tell you when he's going to answer you what he tells you is you seek me and this is the assurance they that seek him will find him and I want to encourage you tonight to read the Bible encourage you to pray encourage you to call upon the Lord encourage you to seek him in the means of grace don't turn away from these things because these are the places where the Lord is going to meet you these are the places where the

Lord is going to bless you and that was a place where he blessed his Ethiopian you know he went a thousand miles to worship the Lord in Jerusalem he didn't find what he was looking there but you see he had the word of the Lord with him in his chariot and as he read it on the way back the Lord used a wonderful means to bless his heart you may have come here tonight looking for something and you haven't found it don't you give up my friend you go back home and you read your Bible you pray to God and you may not you never know what means God will use in your life to bring the knowledge of salvation and the knowledge of Christ as a savior into your heart