

Acts 8

by John Nelson Darby

The sermon explores the early persecution of Christians, the spread of the gospel through Philip's ministry, and the transformative power of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: Acts 8:1

Topics: "The Role of the Holy Spirit", "Persecution and Evangelism"

Description

John Nelson Darby discusses the pivotal events in Acts 8, focusing on Saul's persecution of Christians following Stephen's martyrdom, which marked the culmination of humanity's enmity against God. He emphasizes that while Saul sought to destroy the church, God's sovereign grace began to spread the gospel through the scattered believers, demonstrating the power of the Holy Spirit. The sermon highlights Philip's ministry in Samaria, where he performed miracles and preached the gospel, leading to the conversion of Simon the sorcerer and the Ethiopian eunuch. Darby notes the distinction between belief based on miracles and true faith, as well as the unique role of the apostles in imparting the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, he illustrates how God's providence uses human opposition to advance His kingdom.

Transcript

An important fact, which renders the signification of our narrative still clearer, is here presented to us. Here we find Saul taking part in the death of Stephen. We have seen that the death of Stephen was the end of the history of the enmity of the human heart against God, when God had done everything to try it, and also to restore it; its incurable enmity was manifested, and the end of man before God. There was no longer hope of finding any good since God Himself has made use of everything - judgment in the deluge, the law, the prophets, His own Son, and the testimony of the Holy Ghost. All was in vain. The more God worked, the more man's enmity manifested itself.

Here for the first time we find Saul. Not content with taking part in the death of Stephen, he goes into distant cities in search of Christians to bring them bound to Jerusalem. He is the apostle of man's enmity against Christ. If the history of man was finished, that of the sovereign grace of God was beginning. The spirit of the first martyr takes its place in the presence of Jesus. But the entire number must be completed before Jesus can come and re-unite them with their bodies.

Here we find the first general persecution, which, however, in the hands of God, served to scatter the seed of the gospel. This also is a proof of the free activity of the Holy Ghost to make use of whomsoever He sees fit to select. Still another important fact: while all the Christians are scattered by the persecution, the

apostles remain at Jerusalem. The special mission of Matthew 10:23 was not accomplished. It will be by the power of God hereafter, I doubt not; but not at the moment of which we read here. It is the multitude of Christians scattered by the persecution who preach the gospel in Palestine, and afterwards among the Gentiles. Saul persecutes the assembly with cruel zeal; and the Christians leave the city. It was neither the settled design of man, nor the spiritual zeal of the apostles, but the fury of the enemy, which according to the wisdom of God first disseminated the gospel outside the gates of Jerusalem. The spirit of Stephen gone up to heaven, the gospel of grace is carried into the surrounding districts by means of the enmity of man, and the providence of God who makes use of it leads the scattered ones to communicate in love the gifts they possess. What is man? and what the wisdom and grace of God?

348 Another example of the free activity of the Spirit is found in the person of Philip, chosen to take care of the widows. His service is finished with regard to the widows; but he has acquired a good degree, and great liberty in the faith in Christ Jesus. Setting out from Jerusalem, he goes down to Samaria; and there by the power of his word, and by the miracles given him to do, the people are liberated from the influence of a notorious instrument of Satan - Simon, who exercised the arts of sorcery and had been held to be the great power of God. "Then Simon himself believed also; and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done."

It was the miracles which had exercised this influence over his spirit, not the seed of God, the divine word which had entered into his heart. To believe by means of miracles alone is not the faith which operates by the Holy Ghost, although God may work miracles and signs in order to confirm His word. The end of John 2 shews that Jesus did not trust those who had believed in this way. When the Spirit of God works, requirements are produced in the soul which Jesus alone can satisfy. Thus Nicodemus was under the influence of the miracles when he went to Jesus. To the others reasonable conviction sufficed, and they remained where they were.

The sole desire of Simon is to possess the power of conferring on others by the imposition of his hands the ability to work miracles and signs. He wished to buy it with money, thereby shewing that there was no work of God in his soul. He had "neither part nor lot in this matter." He was in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity; his heart was not right before God. His sin excited the indignation, not the compassion, of Peter. "Thy money perish with thee," said he. But still his heart is not touched with compunction. He asks only that what had been said might not come upon him; not that his thought might be forgiven, or that the state of his heart might be changed.

Here we find still other things which we shall do well to consider. The difference between the operation and the sealing of the Spirit is very clear. The Samaritans had believed and had been baptized, but had not received the Holy Ghost; for He had not yet descended upon them. He had worked by the word in their hearts; men and women were converted, born again, had confessed the name of Jesus; but they were not yet sealed. Then it belonged in a special manner to the apostles to impose hands, and confer the gift of the Spirit. In Acts 19 we see that Paul conferred it; he was a true apostle. Ananias was sent that Saul might receive it; this was a special mission of the Lord Himself. The Spirit might also come without the laying on of hands, as on the hundred and twenty, and on Cornelius; but not one had the power of conferring it save the apostles. It is said, "of the apostles' hand" (v. 18).

349 It is possible, too, that the Spirit might come on a man in this way without an internal work giving life. The Lord does not habitually work thus; but cases of it are not wanting in the Old Testament, such as Balaam, king Saul, and others, where the question of conversion is not raised, shewing that that is another

thing altogether. In the New Testament we do not find a case of it, but the thing is supposed (1 Cor. 12; Heb. 6), and the power to do miracles with the aid of the Holy Ghost and without conversion and life, is clearly presented by the Lord Himself (Matt. 12:26, 27); the Lord does not deny the fact, but declares that He knows not those who have done them; Matt. 7. See Deut. 13. Judas at least was sent to do such.

We see then a new character of the apostolic authority; then the free activity of the Spirit clearly displayed in Philip. By his means the gospel is communicated to a distant country through a proselyte come to Jerusalem to worship the true God; a man in whose heart the word of God possessed full power. It is beautiful to remark in Philip the readiness of his obedience - how he allowed himself to be led by the will of God. He is the object of all attention in the city of Samaria: a notable work had been done by means of him. "Arise," said the angel of the Lord, "and go unto Gaza, which is desert"; but he was not told what he was to do there. And he goes there immediately. There he finds the treasurer of the Queen of Ethiopia. The Spirit says to him, "Go near and join thyself to this chariot"; and he runs immediately to it. The treasurer was reading the word of God, but the key of faith in Jesus was wanting. Philip mounts the chariot, and preaches faith in Jesus to him. All was ordered by God. He was reading what was immediately connected with the sufferings of the Lord; and by the power of the Spirit the explanation of the passage is sent him by the mouth of Philip. The eunuch, with the heart prepared by grace, and already having faith in the word, becomes a Christian. He is baptized by Philip, and goes on his way rejoicing. It is remarkable that the name of Christianity remains to this day in that country, much corrupted (it is true), but in the form which this man implanted. They believe as to the profession of Christ, but practise circumcision - (verse 37 is not authentic).

350 The Spirit of the Lord catches away Philip, and by the miraculous power of God he is found at Azotus. Time and space are nothing to God. From Azotus he evangelises in all the cities till he comes to Caesarea. Further on we find him stationed with his family at this city. He had by this time obtained the fair name of Evangelist.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-nelson-darby/acts-8/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net