

At the end of chapter seven, we witnessed the murder of Stephen, a man full of the Spirit, and wisdom. He faithfully proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the religious leaders killed him for it. The bible says that Saul, who would later become known as Paul, gave his approval, and encouraged the mob to take Stephen's life. Stephen remained faithful to the end, because the Lord was with Him, and he had a clear vision of what lay in store for him in his eternal resting place with the Lord.

This biblical account gives us insight on how we can take our stand today. When we are fully committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ, totally surrendered to His Lordship over our lives, and when we can keep our eyes focused on the prize that lies before us, we will be able to take our stand, no matter what opposition may come.

When Stephen received Christ in his heart, as Lord and Savior, it changed him, and over time, through obedience to the revealed will of God, he became a role model for all Christians, for all times. Likewise, Saul, the chief persecutor of the church, and enemy of the gospel, was changed, and became the most notable evangelist of all time. In tonight's passage of scripture, Luke begins to record the events of another of the Lord's disciples, Philip. As we observe how God used Philip, we can gain some insights in how God may be able to use us as well. Please read along with me, Acts 8:4-8.

Remember that this account is not about Philip who was one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus; this is about another man named Philip. If you have been following along in this study, you will remember that the bible lists Philip, along with Stephen, as being among the seven chosen to meet the ministry needs of the Grecian widows. We think of them as the first deacons, and model the deacon ministry after these men.

Verse four gives us the background for this account. Philip was among those Christians who fled Jerusalem, because of the persecution that broke out against the church, following Stephen's murder. They escaped with their lives, but the bible tells us that they continued to preach the word, wherever they went.

No matter what happens in the days ahead, even if our worlds are turned upside down by the opposition to Christ, and the word of God, we must remain faithful to preach the truth of God's word. In our culture, and in our church polity, pastors, and evangelists, are the preachers of God's word. It is a part of our calling, and responsibility, in the formality of our worship services. It is our God-given job to speak to biblical issues as they relate to our day, and our culture. We have to take stands against the godlessness of our world, and the deceptions of political correctness, to speak the truth, and to provide the leadership, so that people in our congregations will be informed, and willing to take their stands with us.

Notice, however, that neither Stephen, nor Philip, were pastors in the technical sense. The Apostles were the spiritual leaders of the church, and Philip was a layperson who simply committed himself to fulfilling God's will, and purpose, for his life. When God opened the door of opportunity for service, Philip gladly served the Grecian widows. When, because of persecution, Philip fled, he went about preaching the word.

Just because Brother Carl and I share the preaching ministry of the church, it does not mean that God does not use people in a non-pastoral role in the spread of the gospel, or in speaking to the issues of our day from the perspective of faith, and a biblical world-view. Whatever God speaks to your heart through the preaching of His word in a worship service, it is to equip you for life, and ministry, and the biblical principles, and applications, learned need to

be shared with the lost world. You will have opportunities to share the gospel, and speak biblical truth with people, that I will never have, and God has a distinct purpose for you in the accomplishment of his will.

In order to be used of God in more powerful ways requires discipleship, and spiritual growth. In order to preach the word of God, a person must have familiarity with what the bible says, and have a mature understanding of its application. An effective witness has to be filled with the Spirit, and wisdom. He or she must have discernment about God's will for their lives, and a willingness to do whatever the Lord tells them to do.

Like Stephen, God called Philip to service, and when he was obedient, God gave him greater responsibility. Along the way God gifted Philip in every way necessary for Philip to fulfill God's will and purpose for his life. Through continued surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, God was able to use him to reach others with the gospel.

Notice that in the biblical examples of Stephen and Philip, neither man needed a badge to do the will of God. There is no biblical indication that either man looked at ministry as an opportunity for a career, or as a means to gain power, or prestige. It was because they were willing, and completely surrendered to the Lordship of Christ, that God was able to use them in such powerful ways.

Being a pastor, for me, is a great blessing, because I believe with all my heart, I am doing exactly what God has called me to do, but before God's call, I never imagined that I would become a pastor. I was a late bloomer. I didn't start preaching until I was forty-one years old. Because of my circumstances, and poor choices, I suffered many hardships, and it took many years of preparation before I was mature enough to receive God's calling into the ministry. As I grew in my relationship with the Lord, and with all my heart tried to be fully committed to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, God grew me, and used me in ways that I never imagined, and He is still using me, and growing me, to the praise of His glory. Whatever position the Lord may choose for us is not the concern. What is important is that we serve Him with all our hearts; in whatever He calls us to do.

Where the bible says that Philip went down to Samaria, it does not mean that he went south, as we think of it when we look at a map, but that Samaria was at a lower elevation than Jerusalem. Earlier in our study we concluded that the men chosen to minister to the Grecian widows were Grecian Jews. The influence of Greek culture left people more open minded, so that Philip would probably not be crippled by the prejudice of Conservative Judaism.

This lack of prejudice allowed Philip to have boldness to share the gospel with a people group that the Jews normally would have totally rejected. This reminds us that in order to have an effective witness, our hearts have to be right, in the way we think about other people. If we look upon others as objects of disdain, we will never be able to effectively share the love of Christ with them.

Because he was a committed Christian, filled with the Spirit, and willing to be used by God to advance His Kingdom, Philip had a powerful ministry among the Samaritans. The significance of this event, in the overall context of the book of Act, is that it showed that the gospel was not for Jews alone. Accepting, in faith, Jesus Christ, His sacrifice on the cross, and His resurrection from the grave, could save even the people hated by the Jews. God used Philip in an important step in taking the gospel to the whole world.

In accordance with God's will and purpose, the bible says that all the people paid attention to what was being said by Philip when they heard him, and saw the signs that he did. Philip spoke in the power of the Holy Spirit, and God authenticated the gospel message with

miraculous signs, just as He did with the Apostles, and Stephen. Unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed.

In the passage ahead we will read that the Apostles come and lay their hands on the Samaritans so that they might receive the Holy Spirit. Later on we will read of Paul and Barnabas performing miraculous signs, and laying on hands in order for believers to receive the Holy Spirit. The question then arises, “Why doesn’t God work in this way today?”

When we read of these accounts in the book of Acts, it is always in association with the gospel’s advance into a new people group. It was not only a powerful experience in the lives of those who believed, it was also a conformation to the rest of the church that God’s grace had been extended to others.

Today the gospel has gone out, and is going out, to every area of the earth. We do not need the affirmation of a physical demonstration of the Holy Spirit to know that Jesus died for all sinners, regardless of race, color, or nationality. Today the presence of the Holy Spirit is not associated with the laying on of hands, but is demonstrated by the power of God in changed lives.

I am not saying that God cannot perform miraculous signs through committed believers today, but that is not the norm. The demonstration of God’s power is in the lives of His witnesses. Through faith in Christ, we are made Holy, separated from the world, and unto God and His purposes. If faith in Jesus Christ has brought about your new birth, the changes He made in you should be seen and recognized by the lost world.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, happiness, and the other fruits of the Spirit, demonstrate to the lost world that there are precious qualities that faith in Jesus Christ brings to the believer’s life. Approaching life from the perspective of faith, and a biblical worldview, just makes common practical sense, and it will make sense to others when they see the change Jesus makes in you, and their eyes are opened to the truth.

God created the heavens and the earth. That truth is common sense, and makes more sense than the theories of evolution or the big bang. It is wrong to slaughter unborn, or partially born, babies. Only a depraved mind could conceive of, much less justify, such a thing. It is more blessed to give than to receive, and love your neighbor as yourself, are concepts that is foreign to many who hold to a secular worldview. As the opposition to Christian faith increases, it is important that you and I stand upon the truth, and let our voices be heard, so that the lost may see that there is something different about us. They need to be able to see the miraculous change that faith in Jesus Christ brings in every area of our lives.

The result of the Samaritans hearing, and receiving, the gospel message was that there was great joy in that city. If you are a born again Christian, think about that time when you first came to saving faith in Jesus Christ. Did you not have great joy in your heart when you realized the depth of Christ’s love for you, and that Jesus would sacrifice His life for you? Was your heart not filled with joy at knowing that God forgave you of all of your sins, and insured that you would live with Him forever? Are you not thrilled that God has placed His personal presence in you, and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit you never have to face any trial of life on your own? On the day of your baptism, was the whole church full of joy at your profession of faith, and reminded of the goodness of God in their lives.

Joy is infectious. It is contagious. We need to live in the joy that is ours, through faith in Jesus Christ, in such a way as to let the whole world see it at work in our lives, so that they can know that the miracle of faith can happen to them as well. We need to share our faith with

others, not in fear, but in joy. As God has given us the blessings of His grace, we offer His grace to others through our personal testimonies of what God has done in our lives, and the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We are all sinners by nature and by choice. Our sin separates us from God. But, God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him, shall not perish, but have everlasting life. If there are any here who have not come to saving faith, I pray that you will receive God's grace, even tonight. Confess and repent of your sins to God. Trust Jesus and His sacrifice for your forgiveness. Confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord, over your life, and over all, and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, and you will be saved.