

# Title: Acts 8

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### Session 11

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#### Keywords

Philip, Samaria, Simon the Sorcerer, Ethiopian Eunuch, Kandaka, magic, baptism, Isaiah 53

#### Abstract

This lecture examines Acts chapter eight, focusing on the dramatic expansion of the early Christian mission beyond Jerusalem and Judea. Dr. Craig Keener analyzes the ministry of Philip, detailing both his groundbreaking power encounter with Simon the sorcerer in Samaria and his subsequent guidance to an elite African court official from the Nubian kingdom of Meroe. The lecture highlights how early believers overcame severe ethnic, physical, and geographic barriers through complete obedience to the Holy Spirit's guidance. Ultimately, Keener demonstrates how these frontier ministries broke new theological ground, establishing the cross-cultural and international scope of the gospel mission.

#### Outline

##### I. Introduction to Acts 8 and Philip's Mission

- A. Stephen's theological groundwork (Acts 7) vs. Philip's practical execution.
- B. Narrative structure: Samaria mission (8:5-25) and ministry to the African court official (8:26-40).
- C. The role of scattered believers carrying the gospel organically (corroborated in Acts 11).

##### II. Philip's Mission to Samaria and Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8:5-13)

###### A. Geography of the Samaritan Mission:

- 1. Identification of the 'Samaritan city' as Neapolis (built on the site of ancient Shechem).
- 2. Contrast with the city of Sebaste ('the August one'), which had been refounded as a predominantly Greek city.

###### B. Cultural and Historical Context of Magic and Sorcery:

- 1. Magic in the Greco-Roman world: widely used for love potions, sports curses, and manipulation.
- 2. Prominence of Jewish and Samaritan magic practitioners in ancient antiquity (e.g., Acts 13, Acts 19).
- 3. Magic's core mechanism: invoking the names of higher spirits (especially the secret, sacred pronunciation of Yahweh/YHWH) to control lower spirits.

### **C. The Character, Claims, and Status of Simon:**

1. Simon's self-exaltation: claimed to be 'the great power of God.'
2. Justin Martyr's second-century tradition: Simon as the incarnation of the male deity and his consort Helena as the female avatar.
3. Contrast of Simon's self-exaltation with other figures in Acts: Peter, Paul, and Barnabas consistently rejecting divine veneration.
4. Contrast with Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12), who accepted divine worship and was struck dead.

### **D. Theological Implications of Samaritan Conversion:**

1. Samaritans were already circumcised, bypassing the major legal barrier faced by later Gentile converts.
2. Deep societal division: A Jew inviting Samaritans to follow a Jewish Messiah was viewed as a betrayal of Jewish identity, and vice versa.

### **E. Power Encounters and Contemporary Global Parallels:**

1. Biblical precedent: Pharaoh's magicians in Exodus duplication limits, ultimately recognizing 'the finger of God.'
2. Modern global parallels: Documented conversions of witchcraft practitioners and occultists in Indonesia and Southern Africa through direct demonstrations of Holy Spirit superiority.

## **III. Apostolic Ratification and the Holy Spirit in Samaria (Acts 8:14-25)**

### **A. The Theological Debate on receiving the Spirit:**

1. Practical variety of patterns in Acts: Spirit received both before and after water baptism (God's sovereignty).
2. Calvin's perspective: Samaritans lacked the outward, miraculous manifestations of the Spirit rather than basic conversion.
3. Spirit as functional empowerment for witness, transforming Samaritans into partners in the global mission.

### **B. Overcoming Ancient Galilean Prejudices:**

1. Deep theological and geographic animosity (e.g., Mount Gerizim vs. Mount Zion debate).
2. John's dramatic transformation: In Luke 9, John wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume Samaritans; in Acts 8, he lays hands on them to receive the Holy Spirit.

### **C. The Laying on of Hands:**

1. Traditional Jewish background: imparting blessing (Genesis) and authorizing successors (Moses/Joshua).
2. Apostolic goal: multiplying and disseminating spiritual power rather than hoarding authority.

### **D. Simon's Attempted Bribery (Simony) and Peter's Rebuke:**

1. Simon's sight-based recognition of the Spirit's reception (debated whether it was tongues or prophecy).
2. Sorcerers were culturally accustomed to purchasing secret magical formulas.

3. Peter's severe warning: 'You and your money perish with you.'
4. Open-ended conclusion: Simon's fear and plea for apostolic prayer, leaving room for potential repentance.

#### **IV. The Conversion of the African Court Official (Acts 8:26-40)**

##### **A. Philip as Peter's Forerunner:**

1. Philip preaches to Samaritans first, then Peter and John follow; Philip converts the first Gentile before Cornelius.
2. Information source: Luke likely heard this story directly from Philip while staying in his home in Caesarea during Paul's two-year imprisonment.

##### **B. Social and Biblical Identity of the Eunuch:**

1. The text explicitly reiterates five times that he is a eunuch.
2. Greco-Roman view of eunuchs as marginalized 'half-men' and victims of abuse.
3. Legal barrier: Deuteronomy 23:1 barred emasculated men from entering the assembly of Israel, making him a God-fearer rather than a full proselyte.
4. Biblical fulfillment: Isaiah 56:3-5 promises that God will welcome eunuchs and foreigners into His house.

##### **C. Geographic and Historical Background of the Eunuch's Homeland:**

1. Identification as 'Ethiopia,' referring in Greek usage to the Nubian kingdom of Meroe (modern-day Sudan).
2. The title 'Kandaka' (Candace) refers to the ruling Queen Mother of Meroe (e.g., Queen Nawadimak).
3. Meroe was a powerful, wealthy kingdom with extensive trade ties; its treasurer held immense socio-political status.
4. Greek as the language of commerce and administration with Egypt, allowing Philip (a Hellenist) and the official to communicate.
5. Possession of a luxurious Greek scroll of Isaiah, confirming his elite literacy and high wealth.

##### **D. The Divine Setup on the Desert Road:**

1. Philip's seemingly absurd command to travel south at midday on a deserted road toward Gaza.
2. Midday heat normally required resting in the shade, testing Philip's immediate faith and obedience.
3. Philip runs to the chariot and hears the official reading Isaiah 53 aloud (reading silently was rare in antiquity).

##### **E. Theological Explanation of Isaiah 53:**

1. Identifying the Servant: Isaiah's servant as Israel collectively vs. a righteous individual remnant suffering voluntarily and innocently for others.
2. Philip uses the text to preach the good news of Jesus as the fulfilled Servant.

##### **F. Baptism and Miraculous Relocation:**

1. Baptism by full immersion in a desert wadi, symbolizing complete conversion.
2. The Spirit miraculously 'catches' Philip away (physical relocation) to the coastal cities.

3. The Ethiopian official goes on his way rejoicing, carrying the gospel to the southern ends of the earth.

**G. Philip's Settlement in Caesarea:**

1. Philip preaches through the coastal cities (including Azotus/Ashdod) before settling in Caesarea Maritima.

2. Caesarea as a tense, multicultural city where Peter would later encounter Cornelius.

3. The enduring legacy of unsung heroes like Philip who break new ground for the kingdom of God.