

Paul had been won over to Christ's cause. The conversion was amazing in that it involved an actual appearance of the Lord Himself. But wait a minute! Are not all conversions amazing? Yes! Paul, himself, said this about how the Gospel affects the sinner's life:

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. Romans 1:16 (KJV)

I've quoted this verse many times but its truth should not be dulled by repetition. Every sinner who believes in Jesus Christ as Savior has been the recipient of the same power of God as Saul. The circumstances may vary but the power of God is the same – its transforming effect is the same as that of Saul of Tarsus.

For the sake of an overview let us divide up Acts 6-9 in the following way:

1. Acts 6 – the choosing of deacons (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8ff.) including two notables, Stephen and Philip.
2. Acts 7 – the ministry and martyrdom of Stephen.
3. Acts 8 – the ministry of Philip – see also 21:8;
4. Acts 9:1-31 the conversion and ministry of Saul. Includes the powerful message of acceptance and forgiveness in the early church.

Acts 6 – the Choosing of Deacons.

Saul had been struck down by the Gospel. Although the details of Jesus Christ is amazing by itself, the actual display of the power of conversion of the preached Gospel is no less amazing. This conversion was not a sudden event where Saul is overwhelmed just by the appearance of Jesus Christ although that certainly had stopped Saul in his murderous tracks. We need to retrace our steps a little bit because I think Stephen had a lot to do with Saul's conversion. Remember when Stephen was debating for the Christian cause? Let's take a look at a passage.

⁹ Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen. ¹⁰ And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake. Acts 6:9-10 (KJV).

For an important commentary on this passage refer to the endnote¹ and endnote². Stephen was a Gentile-proselyte of Hellenistic persuasion.¹ The Gospel had no boundaries – just as I alluded in a previous lesson, the wildfire of the Gospel was spreading throughout the region and Stephen was up to the task of evangelist-deacon as equipped by the Holy Spirit through giftedness and power.

⁵ And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and

¹ JW Shepard, pg. 54.

Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch:

Others were chosen by the multitude (of the church) but the Holy Spirit zeros on Stephen and Philip so we will cover these two men briefly in this lesson.

The Power of God in Conversion and Giftedness. The power of the Gospel saves sinners – gloriously. The power of the Gospel, make that the Holy Spirit also gives gifts to sinners. These two facets of the work of the Holy Spirit are mutually inclusive. One is not saved without receiving spiritual gifts from the Holy Spirit. Spiritual gifts are accompanied with resultant fruit. Stephen’s path went one way – but non-the-less resulted in fruit for the kingdom of God, Philip’s path another – but yet resulted in fruit. Both men and their giftedness resulted in remarkable gain for the kingdom of God.

It was Stephen’s testimony that made an indelible mark on Saul’s life. As previously noted Saul was very much involved in the ongoing debate with Stephen in the Temple (Solomon’s porch²) the debating occurring in the synagogue where such an exercise happened frequently. The local leaders were becoming inflamed with jealousy. It is in this context that we find Stephen before the Sanhedrin. Saul witness Stephen’s wisdom and total grasp of the Scriptures. He and the counsel could not take their eyes off from the face of Stephen³ as it had the appearance of an angel. This was yet another miracle. See [Exod 34:30](#) and [2 Cor 3:7](#). The similarity is striking and I think the purpose was one of grace in that the Lord made sure these opposing Jews had an opportunity to see God’s power and be persuaded by the Holy Spirit. None appeared to be swayed. However, Luke’s reporting of this miracle was probably reported by Paul himself after his conversion. In the words of J.W. Shepard:

“...When Stephen stood before the Sanhedrin and heard the false charges, tying him up with Jesus in suffering of injustice his face lighted with a supernatural effulgence which impressed all the members of the council, ‘as it had been the face of an angel.’ This was a part of the report Paul must have narrated to Luke, of the experience he had that memorable day, as a member of the Sanhedrin. Saul would never be able to forget that look, try as he might!...”

Philip’s path went another way. J.W. Shepard points out that the two deacons “...became leaders in new missionary and evangelistic enterprises...”⁴ The spreading of the Gospel was like wildfire. All due to Saul’s persecution.

⁴ Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word. ⁵ Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them. Acts 8:4-5 (KJV).

² Acts 3:11.

³ Lenski, “...Aorist participle and aorist verb express simultaneous action.” all the counsel could not take their eyes off Stephen, pg 256 THE INTERPRETATION OF THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES, R. C. H. Lenski. From now on Lenski.

⁴ Pg. 51.



Again, the power of God was so much in evidence in Philip's missionary ministry – to the point that "...there was great joy in that city..." ([Acts 8:8](#)). Interesting. Please make a comparison between Philip's ministry and Jesus' ministry as found especially in [John 4:39-42](#). Please note that it was here that Jesus referred to the world (a missionary emphasis) as a field of wheat ripe and ready to harvest ([John 4:35-38](#)). Philip was a very mobile missionary. He cut across borders as can be seen. Probably the most remembered account of Philip's missionary efforts was the witness to the Eunuch of great authority from Ethiopia. This was a key point in the spreading of the Gospel. Of special note – men and women from all over the world were coming to Jerusalem seeking the LORD. Many during this remarkable expansion of the church found Christ. This man was one of thousands who would be part of the harvest of the Gospel. Philip was a man who was gloriously saved, endued with spiritual gifts, indwelt by the Holy Spirit and was obedient to the leading of the Lord in reaching out to those who *were already*

hungry for the Lord. Some such as Saul were, however, openly hostile to the Gospel but were eventually won over to the Lord and so the power of the Gospel is demonstrated for all to witness.

Is the power of the Gospel in any way diminished today? In no way! Certainly we do not see the remarkable external miracles that were witnessed in the early church but there is no diminishing of the way the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of men and women today. The preaching of the Gospel will in no way be thwarted by the actions of unbelieving men. Hearts are prepared by the Holy Spirit in the same powerful way as in the case of Saul's a word here an act there in the name of the Lord speaks powerfully in the life of a sinner on whom the Spirit is working. The exciting part is that we are just as much a part of this miracle in action today as was Stephen and Philip (along with all the others in the early church).

Endnotes:

1. *The synagogue of the Libertines (ek tēs sunagōgēs tēs legomenēs Libertinōn). The Libertines (Latin libertinus, a freedman or the son of a freedman) were Jews, once slaves of Rome (perhaps descendants of the Jews taken to Rome as captives by Pompey), now set free and settled in Jerusalem and numerous enough to have a synagogue of their own. Schuerer calls a Talmudic myth the statement that there were 480 synagogues in Jerusalem. There were many, no doubt, but how many no one knows. These places of worship and study were in all the cities of the later times where there were Jews enough to maintain one. Apparently Luke here speaks of five such synagogues in Jerusalem (that of the Libertines, of the Cyrenians, of the Alexandrians, of Cilicia, and of Asia). There probably were enough Hellenists in Jerusalem to have five such synagogues. But the language of Luke is not clear on this point. He may make only two groups instead of five since he uses the article tōn twice (once before Libertinōn kai Kurēnaiōn kai Alexandreōn, again before apo Kilikias kai Asias). He also changes from the genitive plural to apo before Cilicia and Asia. But, leaving the number of the synagogues unsettled whether five or two, it is certain that in each one where Stephen appeared as a Hellenist preaching Jesus as the Messiah he met opposition. Certain of them "arose" (anestēsan) "stood up" after they had stood all that they could from Stephen, "disputing with Stephen" (sunzētountes tōi Stephanōi). Present active participle of sunzēteō, to question together as the two on the way to Emmaus did (Luke 24:15). Such interruptions were common with Jews. They give a skilled speaker great opportunity for reply if he is quick in repartee. Evidently Stephen was fully equipped for the emergency. One of their synagogues had men from Cilicia in it, making it practically certain that young Saul of Tarsus, the brilliant student of Gamaliel, was present and tried his wits with Stephen. His ignominious defeat may be one explanation of his zest in the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1).*

—Word Pictures in the New Testament

2. *The Freedmen were the descendants of Jewish slaves captured by Pompey in 63 b.c. and taken to Rome. They were later granted their freedom and formed a Jewish community there. Cyrenians and Alexandrians were from two of the major cities of North Africa, Cyrene (home of the Simon who carried Jesus' cross [Luke 23:26]), and Alexandria. Both cities had large Jewish populations. Cilicia and Asia were Roman provinces in Asia Minor. Since Paul's hometown of Tarsus was located in Cilicia (Acts 21:39; 22:3), he likely attended their synagogue in Jerusalem. That he was present for the events surrounding Stephen's trial and execution is evident from 7:58 and 8:1. It is possible that, as a student of the great Rabban Gamaliel, he even participated in the debate with Stephen.*

—MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The