



## ACTS 6–9

### THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH GROWS IN THE MIDST OF PERSECUTION

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## INTRODUCTION

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The early disciples used the same teaching patterns as Jesus in His ministry—preaching and healing. The Holy Spirit accompanied their efforts as they reenacted the same miracles and taught the same message. In this scriptural section, Luke includes examples from Stephen, Peter, and Saul demonstrating how Jesus fulfilled the Law of Moses.

The Book of Mormon authors shares the same witness, “To this end hath the Law of Moses been given for the typifying of him” (2 Nephi 11:4). Disciples from both books testified that God gave “types and a shadow of things which are to come” (Mosiah 3:10; and Alma 25:15). As they did so their persecution grew, which ironically also grew the church membership.

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## CHAPTER 6

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### The Seven are Called

*Acts 6:1–7*

**Acts 6:1 “the number of the *disciples* was multiplied”** Conversions continued to grow through the Spirit’s witness to the apostles’ preaching and healing. Those Israelites who accepted Jesus as their Messiah and Redeemer and were baptized in His name were first called, “*disciples*.” The name, “Christian” was not initially applied to the believers because, at that point, all the converts were Jewish and they used the word Messiah, rather than the Greek word Christ. The title Christian was not identified until after the Greek-speaking Gentiles began to receive the gospel (as we will discuss in Acts 11:26).

**“the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews”** (NIV). The KJV of the Bible does not clarify that all the disciples were Jewish, as the NIV does. Israelites lived all over the Roman Empire but were identified by different names. The Hellenistic or Grecian Jews, were Greek-like in their culture, manners, customs and language (though educated Jews in Jerusalem spoke Greek, too). “Hebrews” may refer to a group of disciples who spoke the Hebrew language.<sup>1</sup>

A quarrel arose between these two factions of Jews because Greek speakers felt that the Hebrew-speaking widows were not receiving enough daily food or attention. Previously in Acts 2:44–45, 4:32–33, Luke described the disciples living together in Jerusalem sharing all things in common (probably governed by some sort of Law of Consecration). Fighting minorities are often seen across cultures. Yet, this may have not been a matter of selfishness, but of time management.

**Acts 6:2–4 “Brothers and sisters, choose seven men . . . full of the Spirit and wisdom . . . [to] turn this responsibility over to them”** (NIV) The Twelve needed to delegate in order to continue their preaching. This event echoes Exodus 18:13–27, when Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, suggested that Moses find others to help him settle disagreements. The Twelve set out the requirements for the new assignment. Notice the difference between the requirements for the seven and for the Twelve. The seven needed to be honest, wise, and full of the Spirit. Although they had different callings, both groups were needed to serve in order to grow the kingdom and to take care of each need.

**Acts 6:5 “This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose . . .”** (BSB) The disciples practiced common consent as well. Interestingly, this came about when the Hellenistic Jews voiced their concern and each of the seven men chosen had Greek names: Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas. The latter is mentioned as a proselyte or convert to Judaism before converting to become a disciple of Christ.

As the church grew, Luke includes this as the first example of different callings or positions of responsibility in the early church. The ability to live in a united order came about because the early saints were willing to work together as well as work toward financial unity.

**Acts 6:6 “when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them”** Priesthood ordination was involved in the calling of the seven. This became an important part of the Restoration as the Prophet Joseph highlighted in the fifth Article of Faith: “We believe that [all] must be called of God by prophecy and by the laying on of hands by those who are in authority.” These Seven were not Melchizedek priesthood holders, though, as we learn in Acts 8.

**Acts 6:7 “a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith”** Priests refer to descendants of Aaron. Luke features them as a large group who were baptized into the Church. This may have been assisted by the fact that Peter and the Apostles (and Jesus before them), taught in the Temple courtyards where Priests could have heard them and seen their miracles. (In Acts 4:36 we learned that one of those priests was Barnabas who became Paul’s first companion.)

## Stephen Preaches and is Arrested

*Acts 6:8–7:1*

**Acts 6:8 “Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles”** The first of the seven was a man named Stephen who exemplified magnifying one’s calling. In addition to his sensitive service to the widows, Luke shares that he was a great missionary, and through the power of the Lord’s Spirit, he performed miracles and wonders. His short service was a blessing to the early church! He appears only in one episode in Acts, but it is a significant example of the theological and historical movement of the Hellenistic Jewish Christians.

**Acts 6:9 “Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen”** (NIV) Some Jewish men who shared a common station or values created a synagogue for themselves. They met either in homes or separate buildings depending on the number and wealth of the group. Luke describes one such group of who were freed slaves who returned to live in Jerusalem. Male Jewish slaves were given their freedom after seven years, and the Romans released their slaves at age 30 or 35.<sup>2</sup> (Jewish females usually served for life as they became the owner’s concubine and bore his children, Exodus 21:7–11). The KJV uses the Latin word *Libertines* (KJV), though they would have all spoken Greek. This group of freed slaves were initially from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia.

**Acts 6:9b–12 “disputing with Stephen . . . They could not stand up to his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke...”** The group of Freedmen did not receive Stephen’s preaching. He may have assumed that freed slaves would be humble—but it appears not. Yet the Spirit confounded them so that they resorted to lies and false witnesses. Just as we saw with Jesus’ trial, a few Jews spread rumors about Stephen until he was seized and taken to

the Sanhedrin or council. Stephen's defense followed a similar pattern that was used by Alma and Amulek to the Zoramites (Alma 32–24) and Alma to Corinaton (Alma 39–42).

**Acts 6:13–14 “For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place”** Three charges stood against Stephen: 1. Blasphemed against God and Moses, 2. Attacked the Law of Moses, 3. Saying that Jesus would destroy the Temple and the Mosaic customs. Even though the Sanhedrin had implicitly decided to grudgingly tolerate Christians, they would not tolerate any attacks against their temple.

**Acts 6:15 “Stephen[’s] . . . face was like the face of an angel”** The Spirit of the Lord shone through Stephen's face and his message. Matthew described an angel at the tomb: “his countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow” (Matthew 28:3). Luke added that the angels looked like “two men [who] stood by them in shining garments” (Luke 24:4). Joseph Smith described angel Moroni as: “his whole person was glorious beyond description, and his countenance truly like lightning” (JS—H 1:30–32).

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## CHAPTER 7

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**Acts 7:1–2 “the high priest asked Stephen, ‘Are these charges true?’”** (NIV) Stephen would have an opportunity to defend himself against the charges that he has blasphemed against the temple and Mosaic Law. It was very similar to those questions asked of Jesus, but Stephen was inspired to speak rather than to remain silent.

### Stephen's Defense: The History from Abraham to Moses

*Acts 7:2–17*

**Acts 7:2 “Men, brothers, and fathers, listen!”** (BSB) “Fathers” means older authority figures. In his defense, Stephen repeated twelve references to “[y]our fathers.”<sup>3</sup> We also saw a repeated reference coming from the Samaritan Woman at the well in John 4:12 and 20. This is the first example that some scholars use to suggest that Stephen may have been a Samaritan.<sup>4</sup> The native tradition claims Stephen as a Samaritan too.

Unlike the Gentiles, the Samaritans were first taught by Jesus following Jesus' conversation with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, “many of the Samaritans of that city believed on him for the saying of the woman, which testified . . . And many more believed because of his own word” (John 4:39–41). The first branch of disciples grew during the three days that Jesus taught them. Many of these Sarmatian disciples joined themselves with the Jerusalem church as Jesus instructed His apostles, “be my witnesses . . . in all Judea and Samaria” (Acts 1:8).

Acts 8–9 explores missionary work among the Samaritans. I wonder at the claim that Stephen was a Samaritan, as a Samaritan would have received terrible persecution if he were preaching and living in Jerusalem (John 4:9).

**Acts 7:2b–5 “The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham”** Stephen rehearsed the faithful account of Abraham’s obediently following God’s direction to repeatedly relocate across Mesopotamia and into the Promised Land. The text Stephen recited is closer to the Samaritan scriptures than the Hebrew. (“*Charran*” is a different spelling of “*Harran*.”)

St. Stephen before the High Priests and Elders of the Sanhedrin by Mariotto di Nardo, 1408. Image via Wikimedia Commons



**Acts 7:6–8 “God spake on this wise, That his seed should sojourn in a strange land . . .”** Stephen recounted God’s prophecies showing His omniscience and emphasizing “the covenant of circumcision” that Abraham passed down through the patriarchs, Abraham to Isaac to Jacob. By speaking of God’s covenant to Abraham, Stephen showed respect for the Jewish customs. He reviewed the biblical history of salvation as a witness that he had not blasphemed the law. These examples of God’s dealings with the covenant people are significant to Christian history as well.

**Acts 7:9–17 “. . . sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him”** Stephen continued with the Israelite history emphasizing Joseph, the son of Jacob. Samaritans called themselves descendants of Joseph as Ephraimites and Manasseh-ites (Manassen?). In Stephen’s recounting of the history, he included 75 members of Jacob’s family who had come to Egypt (which is consistent with the LXX, Septuagint), but our text of Genesis claims only 70 had. The location for Jacob’s burial in Sychem (or Nabis today) was the Samaritan’s capital (and location of John 4, the woman at the well). Each detail included was mentioned for a reason.

## Stephen's retells Israelite history from Moses to the Promise Land

*Acts 7:18-43*

**Acts 7:18-21 “Moses was born, and . . . Pharaoh’s daughter took him up”** Stephen continued to show his allegiance to the Mosaic tradition by retelling Moses’ call to be a prophet. As he described the political changes in Egypt, he said a new pharaoh, “exploited” (JB) the children of Israel. So God raised up a baby from Jochebed—one of our great women of faith in the Old Testament—who was later named Moses.

**Acts 7:23-26 “when he was full forty years old it came into his heart to visit his brethren”** The first time Moses tried to redeem the Israelites from slavery, they did not understand, and they rejected him. The number forty may be literal here, but it is also used in the Old Testament for a “purification period” (Leviticus 12:3-4; Genesis 7:17; Exodus 24:18; etc.). Stephen used “forty years” four times in recapping Moses’ history (Acts 7:23, 30, 36, 42).



The Sermon of St. Stephen by Vittore Carpaccio, 1514. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

**Acts 7:27-28 “. . . Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us?”** The Israelites’ rejection of Moses’ first attempt to help them was repeated in Jesus’ mission too. His peers questioned His judgement, but Jesus taught: “the Father . . . hath committed all judgment unto the Son” (John 5:22, also see 30; 8:16, etc.) At the end of this sermon, Jesus also connected His experience with Moses: “For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me.” Hosea 12:10, explains that the lives of the prophets are in “similitudes” or types of future events, many of which foreshadowed the Messiah. The Israelites feared Moses’ intentions, so Moses left Egypt for 40 years. Stephen intentionally recited stories about when Israel was unwilling to follow God’s plan and fulfillment of prophecy to connect the ancient and modern experience with Jesus (Acts 27, 39).

**Acts 7:29-30 “Moses . . . fled to Midian . . . forty years”** (NIV) During the next period of purification, Moses fled to the land of Midian. There “the priest of Midian,” Jethro (also known as Reuel) took him into the family and Moses married his daughter, Zipporah. They were blessed with two sons, Gershom and Eliezer (Exodus

2:22; 1 Chronicles 23:15). The Midianites were descendants of Abraham and Keturah's fourth child (Genesis 25:2). We learn in D&C 84:6–7 that Jethro held the Melchizedek priesthood and gave it to Moses.

**Acts 7:31–34 “The voice of the Lord came unto him . . . Put off thy shoes from thy feet: for the place where thou standest is holy ground”** The KJV records that an angel was “in the flame,” which coincides with the light-filled fiery appearance of other angels.<sup>5</sup> After the angel and the flaming bush, God's voice called Moses, who obeyed God and reverently and humbly took off his sandals.

**Acts 7:35–36 “Moses . . . brought them out, after that he had shewed wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red sea and in the wilderness forty years”** God called Moses to go back to Egypt and try again to redeem Israel from bondage or “exile.” Stephen referenced Israel in exile as a transition to the signs and wonders that Jesus and the disciples have performed. Both Moses and Jesus tried to bring Israel from a place of bondage to a state of more freedom.

**Acts 7:37–38 “God will raise up for you a prophet like me”** Stephen drew on several parallels between Jesus and the history of Israel, including this direction from Moses that pointed to Jesus. Stephen carefully crafted the history to highlight these parallels with Jesus: “When the Christ comes, will He do more signs than this *man* has done?” (John 7:31, BLB).

**Acts 7:39–43 “Our ancestors refused to obey him . . . you didn't offer me slaughtered animals and sacrifices those 40 years in the wilderness, did you?”** (ISV) Stephen quoted two Old Testament sections—the first half of verse 42 was from Psalm 81, and the second half cited Amos 5:25–27. Stephen described the children of Israel's apostasy, including the golden calf (but he does not include their fear and rejection to enter the Promised Land), so they had to wait for another purification period of “forty years in the wilderness” (Acts 7:36, 42, WEB).

## Captivity in Babylon

*Acts 7:44–50*

**Acts 7:44–46 “Our fathers had the tabernacle of the Testimony . . . [and] brought it in with Joshua”**

(Remember in the KJV, “Jesus,” is the Greek name for the Hebrew, “Joshua.”) Stephen moved through the history to Joshua entering the Promised Land (again typifying Jesus who will take all the children of the covenant to an eternal Promised Land). In one quick phrase he covered 400 years of conquering the land from the Gentile nations up until Solomon's temple.

**Acts 7:47–48 “Solomon built him an house. Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands”** Stephen next confronted the falsehood that one must worship God in the temple, which was taught by

the Sadducees. This anti-temple theme would have enraged these Jews from across the Diaspora who moved to Jerusalem just to be near the temple. Any kind of attack on the temple was blasphemy to Jews.

**Acts 7:49–50 “Heaven is My throne . . . What kind of house will you build for Me . . . ?”** (BSB) Stephen recited Isaiah 66:1–2, which also echoed Solomon’s prayer at the temple’s dedication (1 Kings 8:27). Many Old Testament scriptures speak of the vastness of God’s creation and responsibilities, which kept their perspective in the context of humanity’s need for a temple (Psalms 68:33; 2 Chronicles 2:6).

**Acts 7:51 “just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit!”** (NIV) After Stephen’s short summary of the history of Israel, from Abraham to Solomon, he reiterated his theme. The Israelites have been, “stiff necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears.” Their fathers rejected the prophets and they have rejected their Messiah, the Son of God Himself.

**Acts 7:52 “Just One”** or “the Righteous One” (BSB), was a title used often in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms, but is not found in the Gospels. Luke repeats it twice in Acts and four times in the Epistles. It is another beautiful and meaningful title for Jesus.

**Acts 7:53–54 “When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him”** Stephen honored the Law of Moses by saying it was “ordained by angels,” but then attacked the high priest, Sanhedrin, and anyone else in his audience with the charge that they “have not kept it.” This infuriated them. “Cut to the heart” means enraged and found guilty.

## Stephen’s vision

*Acts 7:55–56*

**Acts 7: 55 “he being full of the Holy Ghost . . . saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God”** The Sanhedrin’s counterattack on Stephen was interrupted by his vision, even a throne theophany where he saw God in His glory. This is a great scripture for describing the separate nature of the Godhead. Jesus taking the place of honor, on the right hand of God, is both symbolic and consistent with Hebrews 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; Joseph Smith’s First Vision, etc.

**Acts 7:56 “Son of Man”** was the title Jesus used when identifying Himself as the Messiah in John 1:5 and Mark 2:10. The Gospels use it 88 times to refer to Jesus. In the rest of the New Testament, it is only found in four places (see Hebrews 3:6; Revelation 1:13; 14:14). The Old Testament uses it most often for non-messianic people such as Daniel and Ezekiel (92 times). In Moses 1:12, Satan calls Moses “son of man.” Also, in Moses we learn the divine nature of the title for the Father and Son: “in the language of Adam, Man of Holiness is his name, and the name of his Only Begotten is the Son of Man, even Jesus Christ” (Moses 6:57).





The Stoning of St. Stephen by Luigi Garzi, 17th century. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

## Stoning of Steven

*Acts 7:58-8:2*

**Acts 7:58** “They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him” (BSB) The Law of Moses prescribed stoning for blasphemy (Leviticus 24:11–16). Stephen had been charged with this in Acts 6:11–13. Actually, Stephen was stoned for saying he had had a vision of God, not for preaching or even scolding the people. Stoning him was done without a trial and without Roman consent. This suggests that Jesus could have been killed by the Jews if they had wanted to take credit for it (or perhaps do it illegally).<sup>6</sup> In the Old Testament times, most crimes against God (i.e. blasphemy, Sabbath breaking, idolatry, etc.) were punished by stoning. The legality of this stoning is questioned because Jerusalem was under Roman rule.

Stephen would have been dragged from the judgement hall at the temple across Jerusalem and out of one of the city gates. Outside the city, the first witness would have thrown the victim off a cliff or ramp (built about twice a man's height), so that the victim fell on his or her back. If the victim fell on his or her face, the first witness would have had the responsibility of turning him or her over. If still alive, a second witness would have thrown a large rock at the victim's heart. If the blow did not kill the victim, then other men would have taken off their outer cloaks to have more freedom to throw their stones, and then aimed their rocks at the victim until death resulted.

**“laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.”** Luke recorded that the witnesses of Stephen's stoning took off their outer cloaks as a sign of their participation. The role of the “young man” (probably under 30), as guardian of the cloaks was given to someone too young to be in the Sanhedrin (under 50), but who aspired to be of help and potentially have a position there someday.<sup>7</sup> This is how Luke introduces his beloved Christian missionary companion.

## INTRODUCING SAUL-PAUL

Luke offers a sneak preview of the next central figure in the book of Acts. We have no evidence that Saul acted as an eager listener to Stephen's testimony (as Alma the Elder), but instead, he was grouped with the persecutors. Saul is the Hebrew name for “Paul” in Greek. In the Old Testament, “Saul” was the first king of unified Israel, the star of the tribe of Benjamin. Paul was also a Benjaminite, so we assume his parents honored him and their ancestor by naming their son Saul (Philippians 3:5). Luke mentions Saul seventeen times between here and Acts 13. After that point, throughout the entire New Testament, Saul is always called, “Paul.”

Later in the text, Luke includes that Saul was a Roman Citizen, and a student of the great rabbi and Sanhedrin member, Gamaliel of Jerusalem (Acts 22:3, 25). As a member of the Sanhedrin, Gamaliel would have been aware of Jesus' and Peter's preaching. Paradoxically, Paul's writings do not include that he heard anything about Jesus during His ministry. He grew up in Tarsus, as a “Hebrew of Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee.” We assume that his family would have joined annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem (Philippians 3:5). Paul gives more autobiographical tidbits in his Epistles, which we will explore later.



The Apostle Paul by Anthonis van Dyck. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

**Acts 7:59** “While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit’” (NIV) Stephen received the title of the first Christian martyr (although John the Baptist and Jesus had already been martyred). Jesus had warned the disciples in Matthew 24:9 that some would suffer martyrdom, and many disciples did (including ten of the Twelve). From this point on, Jerusalem would become the enemy of the early Christian church.

**Acts 7:60** “And having fallen on *his* knees, he cried in a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not place this sin to them’” (BLB) Luke includes Stephen’s request for God to forgive those who have killed him, just as he alone included Jesus’ words, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). He then concludes with the euphemism, “he fell asleep.” This is an expression of faith in the afterlife. In Luke’s writings, it represents a belief in the Plan of Salvation.

In Luke’s parallel structure—both in his Gospel and the Book of Acts—he emphasizes that the Apostolic church carried out the same things that Jesus did. Just as the Old Testament Prophets typified the Promised Messiah, so too, the Apostles’ and early disciples’ lives were patterned after their master, Jesus.

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## CHAPTER 8

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**Acts 8:1a** “Saul was consenting unto his death” Luke adds a second statement in his account to make sure that his audience understands that Saul was among those who wanted Stephen dead.

**Acts 8:2** “devout men carried Stephen *to his burial*, and made great lamentation over him” Other disciples were allowed to honor Stephen’s body with a burial. Luke’s brief description sounds as if the saints’ mourning practices were similar to the traditional ritualized Jewish lamentations—including days of elaborate wailing, putting ashes on one’s head, and tearing one’s clothes, all to dramatize great sorrow.<sup>8</sup>

### Further Persecution in Jerusalem

*Acts 8:1b-4*

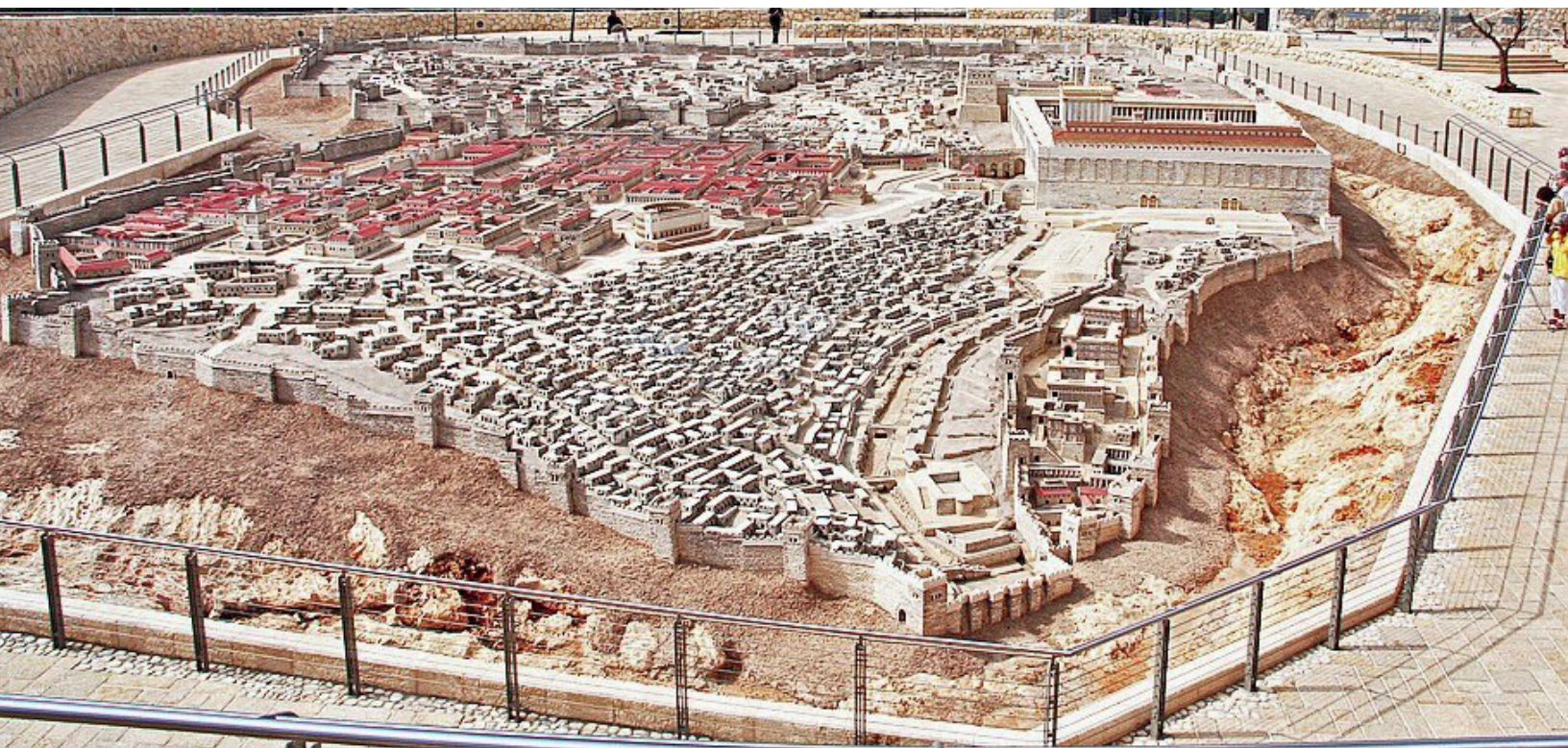
**Acts 8:1b** “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem . . .” The early persecutions were local, centered in Jerusalem. In a couple of decades (AD 54–68), Nero would attack Christians across the empire.

“all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria” This brings up the question of why the apostles were not scattered with their flock? Perhaps only the Samaritan and Greek Christians were persecuted not Jewish Christians. Or perhaps the apostles were unaffected because the local Jewish leaders were frightened

of their power to work miracles. In any case, the scattering would have affected their ability to share all things in common.

**Acts 8:3** “Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison” (NIV) Saul is no longer portrayed as a young silent witness, but as the chief persecutor of the Jerusalem disciples. Later in Paul’s letters, he verifies this description:

- Galatians 1:13 “beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it”
- Philippians 3:6 “As for my zeal, I was a persecutor of the church” (ISV)



Model of ancient Jerusalem. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

**Acts 8:4** “They that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word” The Jews who tried to stop the followers of Jesus, instead ended up helping spread the Good News. God’s hand appears to have been directing the scattering as a means of spreading the gospel to allow more of God’s children to learn of His Son and trust in Him. This exemplifies how the Lord uses affliction to bring about His purposes. As the saints endured their hardships, it strengthened their faith, hope, and determination. Over time, as they witnessed the spread of the Church, they saw the hand of the Lord directing their scattering to bring about His purposes (Acts 13:38). As a result of the persecution, Jesus’ saving message spread beyond Jerusalem into other neighborhoods across Judea and Samaria.

From this point on, Luke does not speak of proselytizing in Jerusalem. Luke includes witnesses who gave their lives as martyrs in Jerusalem, and now turns to record the disciples preaching in two other regions: Judea and Samaria.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly now, the Spirit took the missionaries to Samaria, in contrast to Matthew 10:5 that described Jesus instructing His apostles to not preach to the Samaritans, or at least not for the time being. Jesus had taught there, but on the whole, Samaria was not opened to proselytizing until after the Lord's resurrection as He commissioned: "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

## Missions in Samaria and Judea

*Acts 8–12*

### MISSIONARY WORK BENEFITED BY THE ROMAN EMPIRE

As missionary work extended beyond Jerusalem, two things in particular helped it spread: The ease of travel and the unity of language. Travel from one end of the Roman Empire to the other was enabled by the relative political security and good roads. Romans built and maintained new roads that connected their Empire across the Mediterranean. They patrolled water ways and collected taxes at each port. This safety was unique in the ancient world.

The Greek language began spreading as early as 325 BC, when Alexander the Great began his conquering spree across the Mediterranean and beyond. By the time of the New Testament, all educated people throughout the Roman Empire spoke Greek (even though each province also spoke their own local language—i.e. in Judea, Aramaic, in Rome, Latin). With Greek so universally understood, missionary work could spread without a language barrier.

## Phillip Evangelizes Samaria

*Acts 8:5–8*

**Acts 8:5** “**Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ**” Philip was a common Greek name, including that of Alexander the Great's father. This one, who was probably Philip of the Seven, called and ordained help to ensure food and care were given to the widows (Acts 6:1–6). Just as his colleague Stephen, Philip also served as a missionary or an evangelist. We learn that later he did not have the Melchizedek priesthood to bestow the Gift of the Holy Ghost (Acts 8:14–15), that he had four daughters with the gift of prophecy, and that he was a companion to Paul on his third apostolic mission (Acts 21:9–15).

“**Went down**” is always used to go anywhere from Jerusalem, regardless of the geography. Even though there are higher mountains than Mount Moriah, no place is holier to a Jew so it is figuratively the highest place on earth for worship.<sup>10</sup>

**“to the city of Samaria”** In Greek *“the city”* suggests he went to either to a chief city of Samaria, or “one’s native city, the city in which one lives.” This opens the possibility of Philip being a Samaritan, too. It also reaches back to Jesus’ two-day visit to the capital of Samaria, the city of Sychar. John 4:39–42 describes the conversion of many in that city, after Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ANIMOSITY BETWEEN JEWS AND SAMARITANS

The Samaritans and Jews had been arch enemies ever since the political split of Israel and Judea after King Solomon. In 538 BC, animosity flared up worse than ever as the Jews returned from Babylon. The Samaritans offered to help them rebuild their temple, but the Jewish leader Zerubbabel refused their help without proper Levitical genealogical evidence (Ezra 4:1–4 and Nehemiah 2:19–20). In retribution, the Samaritans violently and politically tried to stop the Jews from rebuilding the city of Jerusalem, the wall around it, and their temple. In the fourth century BC, The Samaritans built themselves a temple on Mount Gerizim (2,890 feet) near their capital city, Shechem. In 128 BC, acting under orders from the high priest, John Hyrcanus, Jewish activists climbed Mt. Gerizim and destroyed the Samaritan Temple. The Jews then captured the Samaritan city of Shechem. Years later the Samaritans regained their city, but the demolition of their temple could not have been more reprehensible.<sup>11</sup> A century and a half later, by the time of the New Testament, Jews would accept a Samaritan as a Jewish convert “if they denied Mt. Gerizim (as the temple site), and if they acknowledged Jerusalem and the resurrection of the dead.”<sup>12</sup>

The Samaritans had six main beliefs—all based on the Pentateuch—that opened their hearts to the news of the coming of the Messiah / Christ / Anointed One. We also can see evidence of these beliefs in Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well in John 4.

1. Believe in one God
2. Believe Moses was the greatest and final, or “seal” of the prophets
3. Believe the first 5 Books of Moses (Pentateuch or Torah) as the word of God, and reject all other scripture
4. Believe that Mt. Gerizim was the chosen place for God’s Temple
5. Believe that at the end of time a “Restorer” or Messiah will usher in a new dispensation, teach the law, and restore proper modes of worship
6. Believe in a final day of rewards for the righteous and punishments for the wicked

**Acts 8:6–7 “the people . . . gave heed unto . . . Philip . . . seeing the miracles . . . unclean spirits . . . came out . . . palsies, and . . . lame, were healed”** Signs again accompanied preaching, but now the Spirit empowered the same miracles that Jesus had performed previously. Healing physical and spiritual maladies go hand in hand. The listing of miracles is interesting knowing that Philip did not hold the Melchizedek priesthood (Acts 8:14–15). It appears that Philip was a Priest. Elder Wilford Woodruff said that he never “had more of the protection of the Lord than while holding the office of a Priest. The Lord revealed to me by visions, by revelations, and by the Holy Spirit, many things that lay before me.”<sup>13</sup>

All of these miracles come as gifts of the Spirit and are available through the power of God for all who seek “earnestly the best gifts, always remembering for what they are given” (D&C 46:8; also see 1 Corinthians 10; Moroni 10). Women and children are included in those to whom God pours out the gifts of the Spirit such as healing, visions, faith, hope, and charity. The prophetess Eliza R. Snow recorded, “Prest. [Joseph] Smith continued the subject by adverting to the commission given to the ancient apostles ‘Go ye into all the world’ &c.— no matter who believeth; these signs, such as healing the sick, casting out devils &c. should follow all that believe whether male or female.”<sup>14</sup>

The Hellenist Christians (who probably included Philip and the Seven called to serve, as we discussed in Acts 6:5) were ideally suited to evangelize Samaria. We assume the cultural antagonism between the Jews and Samaritans would have been less of a problem if their missionaries were from the diaspora, not Jerusalem. Whatever country the missionaries came from, the Spirit of truth was strong enough to overcome the cultural background and baggage that had separated the Samaritans and Jews for a millennium.

**Acts 8:8 “there was great joy in that city”** Their joy stemmed from not only the healing and preaching of the Samaritans, but also from the missionaries finding success in their labors.

## Simon the Sorcerer

*Acts 8:9–25*

**Acts 8:9 “Simon . . . used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria”** Justin, from the early second century, recorded that “Simon” was “Simon Magnus,” the famous Samaritan who became the founder of the Christian Gnostics.<sup>15</sup> He taught that sub-divinities sprang from the true God. The Old Testament creator was a junior divinity who made a physical world by mistake. Luke did not record that, but identifies him as full of pride, dissent, and satanic sources.

**Acts 8:10–11 “they all gave heed . . . This man is the great power of God”** Simon’s claim to be some sort of Great Power, had enchanted the Samaritans for years. However, soon the truth would prove his magic as a counterfeit stemming from the great and evil usurper, Satan himself.

**Acts 8:12** “they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women” (NIV) The Samaritans who heard and received Philip’s witness differentiated the difference between sorcery and truth, and committed to baptism. This verse outlines the principle beliefs required for baptism: Jesus is the Messiah / Christ, and the Kingdom of God is here. I think it is also significant that Luke includes “men and women.” Luke’s inclusion shows a change from Judaism to Christianity that included women in church membership, with responsibilities, and a voice to witness.

**Acts 8:13** “Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere” (NIV) Simon’s conversion seems to be linked to the miracles. Luke makes that connection in this verse, in contrast to many Jews who previously did not.

**Acts 8:14–17** “When the apostles . . . heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John . . . [who] laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit” (BSB) These are exciting verses that demonstrate the different priesthoods functioning in the primitive church. As the branches in Samaria grew, two apostolic leaders traveled the two- or three-day journey north (100 km or 62 miles) to provide the new saints confirmation, and to make sure everything was in order. Completing their baptism with the confirming gift of the Holy Ghost was, and is, a Melchizedek Priesthood ordinance (D&C 84:64). The pattern in the primitive church demonstrates that the early converts felt a witness of the Spirit, but still needed the cleansing power and direction that comes from the Gift of the Holy Ghost. The second ordinance of confirmation completed their baptism of water with the potential for the baptism of fire.<sup>16</sup>

**Acts 8:18–19** “when Simon saw . . . he offered them money . . . Give me also this power” The sinful practice of offering money for ecclesiastical favors is known as “priestcraft.” Because of this story, the word “Simony” is used to buy an ecclesiastical office through payment. This is one of Satan’s well-known maxims: “You can buy anything in this world with money.”

The prophet Alma in the Book of Mormon described it: “many who loved the vain things of the world, and they went forth preaching false doctrines; and this they did for the sake of riches and honor.” Alma also denounced it: “Were priestcraft to be enforced among this people it would prove their entire destruction” (Alma 1:16, 12).

**Acts 8:20–23** “you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! . . . Repent” (ESV) Peter was completely disgusted with Simon’s attitude; yet he still encouraged him to change his heart and repent. Peter discerned that Simon had been poisoned by “bitterness and sin.” Luke has already explained that Simon was filled with pride (Acts 8:9). God’s forgiveness can only come if repentant sinners change their hearts and habits.

**Acts 8:24** “Pray to the Lord for me . . .” (NIV) We are not told how the story ended, only that Simon recognized



that the apostles had more power than he did. His first reaction did not demonstrate much self-initiative. Yet, he knew that righteous prayer was a powerful tool.

**Acts 8:25** “when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, returned . . .” The scene ends with Peter and John taking the long way home to Jerusalem to preach “in many villages of the Samaritans.” It appears that the early disciples held no prejudice against the Jews’ detested neighbors. They also used every opportunity to testify and teach as missionaries.

## Philip and the Ethiopian

*Acts 8:26–40*

**Acts 8:26** “an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Go south to the road . . . to Gaza’ (NIV) For his next missionary transfer, Philip received divine direction through an angel. Quite specific instructions were given, including which road to travel. The road from Jerusalem to Egypt lay along the coastal plain to the Mediterranean and south. Gaza was the Egyptian boarder then.

**Acts 8:27** “he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch . . .” (BSB) This traveling Ethiopian had a position of great authority; he was in charge of the national treasury. His office was like a national cabinet member, or a court official. Often chief attendants to the king or queen were emasculated to insure they would not be seduced or abuse a woman in the court. In the Old Testament, eunuchs could not fully belong to the congregation (Deuteronomy 23:1). Yet, in Jesus’ restored higher law, and with angelic guidance, Philip had no hesitation about teaching this man.

### ETHIOPIA

Ethiopians were Nubians. In the OT, the country was also called “Cush” (Genesis 2:13). Their nation was the exotic region on the Nile River, just south of Egypt (where modern Sudan is today). It was often under Egyptian rule. From 500 years before Abraham, they had a reputation for exporting gold, ivory, and spices.

“**Candace**” was not a first name, but rather a title. It was a transcription of the Nubian word for queen, “*Kntky*.”<sup>17</sup> All Nubian queens used it, just as each Roman Emperor adopted, “Caesar.”

“**This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship**” (NIV) The Ethiopian was returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, perhaps for one of the three major feasts (Passover, Pentecost or Tabernacles). Presumably, he would have been “a God-fearing proselyte,” meaning he was converted in heart, but he was not a full circumcised member. Throughout the New Testament, and the Book of Acts in particular, this title is regularly used as a category of Jewish converts (10:7, 22; 13:26, 43; etc.).



**Saint Philip Baptising the Ethiopian Eunuch by Aelbert Cuyp, ca. 1655. Image via Wikimedia Commons.**

**Acts 8:29 “The Spirit told Philip, ‘Go and join that chariot”** (CSB) The Spirit took over the angel’s role of guiding Philip’s missionary efforts to this specific man. The Spirit continues this individual ministry as each person in each generation is cherished by God.

**Acts 8:30 “Philip ran up and heard the man reading Isaiah”** (BSB) The ancients commonly read aloud. Philip’s run set a great example of how to follow promptings. The timing was absolutely miraculous. The Spirit prompted Philip to run right before the man read some of the most important verses in understanding Jesus as the Promised Messiah. If Philip had not run, he may have missed that opportunity. The timing was a miracle. As Philip heard the Ethiopian reading, he asked him if he understood the Isaiah passage.

**Acts 8:31 “How can I, except some man should guide me?”** The Ethiopian had remarkable faith. First, he believed Philip could help him understand Isaiah and invited him to sit with him in the chariot. Then he made the leap of faith to accept Jesus as the promised Messiah. This is the first of three conversion stories in the Book of Acts (followed by Saul in Ch. 9, and Cornelius in Ch. 10). Each shows another step in the mission to the Gentiles, opened with God’s direction.

**Acts 8:32–34 “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter . . . who is the prophet talking about”** The Ethiopian’s question is asked by biblical scholars today about the same passage in Isaiah 53:7–8. It belongs to Isaiah’s four “Suffering Servant passages,” which Christians interpret as prophecy about Jesus’ passion.<sup>18</sup> Philip followed the example that Jesus set for his disciples on how to interpret Scriptures. Jesus “expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” and taught that “everything must be fulfilled that is written about me” (Luke 24:27, 44–45).

**Acts 8:35 “Then Philip . . . preached unto him Jesus”** Philip used the scriptures to show how Jesus fulfilled the Isaian suffering servant passages; he taught the Gospel by directions from the Spirit. When we teach by the Spirit, the words just tumble out of our mouths.

**Acts 8:36 “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?”** (BSB) We are not told how long their discussion lasted before the Ethiopian asked Philip for baptism, but it sounds as though it was before the day was out.

**Acts 8:37 “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God”** The first half of this verse is not presented in the best Greek manuscripts. It appears to have been added by a later editor of the Western text. The second half quoted here, is the Ethiopian’s powerful testimony of our Savior.

**Acts 8:38 “. . . stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water . . .”** Immersion was practiced by the earliest church as is described here by both of the men going “*down*” into the water. The Greek word also describes not only being immersed, but the process of change.<sup>19</sup>

**Acts 8:39–40 “. . . the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip . . .”** After the baptism, the Spirit of the Lord conveyed Philip to another area where he was needed. This spiritual transportation was also given to the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 2:16). Philip’s next assignment was in Azotus, fifty miles north of Gaza on the Mediterranean Sea. He preached from there to Caesarea, 200 miles further north. This is also where Paul stayed with Philip in Acts 21.

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## CHAPTER 9

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### Saul’s First Vision on the Road to Damascus

**Acts 9:1 “Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples . . . went unto the high priest”** Now several years after Jesus’ resurrection,<sup>20</sup> the persecution against the disciples grew under the hand of the dynamic, young Saul of Tarsus. His efforts were approved by the high priest, probably Caiaphas (AD 18–36).

**Acts 9:2** “. . . for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, if he found any men or women . . .” Damascus was the oldest continually inhabited city at that time. Damascus was 208 miles north of Jerusalem in what is now modern Syria. Biblical scholars question the idea that the High Priest had jurisdiction over religion in other countries, but perhaps he still directed the synagogue worship. We know that Roman law allowed ten denominations some level of “religious freedom,” and Judaism was one of those ten. This is one of the reasons why there were so many Jews scattered across the Roman Empire, especially in bigger cities.

Saul’s goal to bind “men and women” was also significant because women did not actively participate in Jewish synagogue worship, but they did as Christian disciples. House churches were organized and run by women; they prayed, prophesied, taught, and served as missionaries (Romans 16:1–2, 7 Philippians 4:3; 1 Corinthians 11:5a; Titus 2:3; etc.).<sup>21</sup>

**“The Way”** This is the first name used to identify the group of Jews who were disciples of Jesus and claimed that he is the Son of God and promised Messiah. Before they were called Christians, we find the name “The Way” to differentiate them from other Jews. The name comes from Jesus’ Last Supper, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). He is the way back to the presence of God, back to the tree of life to live forever, but through Jesus’ way, we can eat without our sins.

“The Way” was symbolically outlined as the priest’s path through the Tabernacle. First priests washed, clothed, offered sacrifices, were vicariously purified, and entered into the Holy Place where constant bread and wine were beside the tree of life, which illuminated the veil. This Way outlines the way for all disciples to return to the presence of God, which is represented as the Holy of Holies or God’s throne room (also see Isaiah 35:8; Psalm 1:6; Malachi 3:1).

**“he could bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem”** This would have been at least a week-long trip on horse and longer on foot to Damascus (330 km). Later when the story is retold, we learn that chief priests traveled the journey with Saul (Acts 26:12). This helps us understand how serious the threat of the disciples had become to the Jewish leaders, that they would travel over 200 miles to stop the saints from preaching. We also learn how far the disciples had spread in a couple of years if there were enough of them to attend synagogues in Damascus. Saul and his posse were determined that the distance was worth the effort to bind the disciples as heretics so that they could bring them back to Jerusalem for imprisonment or stoning.

As we look back on the story we wonder if Saul received any promptings or thoughts along the way. President David O. McKay wondered, “The travel would have taken about a week, perhaps the shining face of Stephen, or the children’s cries for their parents whom Saul bound began to pierce his soul more keenly and perhaps he wondered if the work of the Lord should make him feel so restless.”

**Acts 9:3–4 “suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven . . . he fell . . . heard a voice . . . Saul, why persecutest thou me?”** After days of traveling, shortly before the search party arrived, the Lord redirected Saul. Luke emphasizes how bright the light was that caused Saul to fall. In later retellings he adds that it was about noon (Acts 22:18; 26:12), and that the voice spoke Hebrew to him (Acts 26:14). In each of the three accounts that Luke includes of Saul’s first vision, he includes different details. (Saul also had six other recorded visions.<sup>22</sup>) Just like Saul, sooner or later each of us must face the Lord. Elder Maxwell explained that at that point, “It will mean much less to kneel down when it is no longer possible to stand up.”<sup>23</sup>

**Acts 9:5 “Who art thou? I am Jesus . . . it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks”** The Lord follows His introduction with another reprimand. The call to repentance is perhaps the most often repeated command from Jesus and His prophets—from John the Baptist to President Russell M. Nelson (Matthew 3:2).<sup>24</sup> Jesus began His ministry as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels with repentance: “from that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent’” (Matthew 4:17; also see, Mark 1:15 Luke 5:32). We consistently find the injunction to repent. It appears 130 times in the Doctrine and Covenants and 362 times in the Book of Mormon.<sup>25</sup> It is not only numerically powerful, but also modern scripture explains how to repent and how the Savior’s atoning sacrifice can mediate and cleanse humanity.

A “prick” referred to a goad—either a sharp spear or gadget used to prick the back of animals to make them move ahead. The tendency when animals were pricked was to kick back—but that only added distress and drove the wound deeper.

**Acts 9:6 “what wilt thou have me to do?”** This is a good question for each disciple to include daily in our morning prayers. However, the first half of this verse, including Saul’s trembling and his question, is not found in other English translations. The Lord’s reproof turns to direction as other translations read from “don’t kick . . .” to “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do” (NIV).

**Acts 9:7 “the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man”** The same spiritual experiences are often perceived differently by each person, even in the same place and at the same time. Saul saw a vision, but the veil was closed over the chief priest’s eyes. Yet they heard the Lord’s voice giving directions for them to change their plans of persecution.

**Acts 9:8–9 “Saul got up . . . For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything”** (NIV). The three days of darkness (here and in the Book of Mormon) may symbolize the death of the carnal man, or the time the Lord was in the tomb, or the three days before a new life. The Lord caused the blindness, but Saul chose to fast as a sign of his repentance and humility before God. Likewise, we do not choose our challenges, but how we handle them.



Conversion of St Paul on the Road to Damascus by Hans Speckaert, ca. 1570. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

**Acts 9:10–11** “Ananias’ . . . ‘Here I am, Lord’ . . . ‘ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying” (BSB) This local leader received divine direction for his jurisdiction. It was not solicited, but he listened. One way I like to read the scriptures is to personally answer each of the questions the Lord asks. Ananias answered, like the child prophet Samuel, that he heard the Lord and wanted to learn more. Ananias may have thought his heart was willing to obey, but when the call came, he questioned God.

**Acts 9:12–14** “Lord, I have heard by many . . .” Ananias trusted his own wisdom, what he thought he knew, more than what God said. The “Ananias principle,” is learning to *ask* God rather than *tell* Him.<sup>26</sup> Ananias had no idea of the impact of God’s inspiration. In fact, he was frightened to follow it. From a logical perspective, Ananias feared that Saul’s conversion was just a “trap” to imprison more of the saints. But mortal logic can detour us from receiving revelation, as the Lord taught Isaiah, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways” (Is 55:8).

**Acts 9:15–16** “Go . . . I will show . . .” This principle of following God in faith, and trusting that He “will show” us what to do can lead to miraculous experiences. The Lord revealed to Ananias that Saul had a three-fold missionary assignment: Saul would preach to the Gentiles, kings, and Israelites.

**Acts 9:17** “**Brother Saul . . .**” Ananias quickly put aside his personal fears and followed the Lord’s directions. In calling him “Brother Saul,” Ananias welcomed him into The Way as a fellow disciple.

“**Receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost**” Ananias became one of the few people other than Jesus to heal the blind. Each of the miracles that Luke includes in the Book of Acts was first performed by the Lord, thus showing that the Apostolic Church followed Jesus’ example and received God’s power. In addition to his physical sight, Saul received spiritual sight from the Spirit.

**Acts 9:18** “**Immediately, something . . . fell from Saul’s eyes . . . He got up and was baptized**” (NIV) We all have something blocking our vision as “we see through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Saul’s repentant heart turned him completely around, 180 degrees. He intended to imprison the disciples, but instead joined them. We are not told if the chief priests who traveled with him were baptized, too. The new church was again following the path that Jesus prescribed: “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5, ESV).

**Acts 9:19–22** “**Saul spent several days with the disciples . . . and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah**” (NIV) Luke doesn’t say how long it took Saul to gain the trust of the local disciples, nor how long he served as a missionary in Damascus, but in Galatians 1:18 Paul reports that he preached in Damascus for three years. That gave Saul some time before he had to face his former associates in Jerusalem and declare that he was wrong. (There was also a change of high priests during that period.)

**Acts 9:23–25** “**the Jews took counsel to kill him . . . [so] the disciples took him by night, and let him down by the wall in a basket**” Ironically, Saul himself had to escape persecution from the Jews. They were so intent on killing him that he could not even sneak out of the city gate. It is interesting how the tables turn in life. We are often in the same place we vowed never to be.

## Saul in Jerusalem

*Acts 9:26–31*

**Acts 9:26–27** “**he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him. Then Barnabas brought him to the apostles . . .**” (BSB) It appears that Saul was reticent about returning to Jerusalem—as it took him three years—and even then, he only came because his life was in danger. Even though there had been no word of Saul for three years, he had had such a bad reputation in Jerusalem that the disciples were cautious about believing

his story. The saints' rejection undoubtedly reopened his pain and regret for hurting them. The Lord blessed him with one friend. A good Levite, named Barnabas came to his defense (Acts 4:36). Barnabas even requested that Saul join him as a missionary companion.

**Acts 9:28–30 “they tried to kill him. When the brothers learned of this, they . . . sent him off”** (BSB) Luke's retelling and Paul's memory have a few differences. Saul wrote in his Epistle to the Galatians that he only stayed in Jerusalem for fifteen days on that first trip to Jerusalem, and only met with the apostles Peter and James (Gal 1:18–19). For safety sake, he did not stay long as Luke remembered that Saul “spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians” (9:29) This is why the Grecians wanted to kill him. Whatever the cause and timing, the apostles called Saul away to serve a mission with Barnabas to Saul's hometown, Tarsus (in what is now modern Turkey). Saul did not return to Jerusalem until he reported his mission to the Twelve after five years.

**Acts 9:31 “the churches [had] rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria”** Over time, with a different high priest and with Saul gone, the Jews stopped their persecution against the saints in Palestine for a period. This allowed the church to grow and they enjoyed the Spirit of peace for a time.

## Peter Heals Aeneas

*Acts 9:32–35*

**Acts 9:32 “As Peter traveled about the country, he went to visit the Lord's people”** (NIV) Luke returns to spotlighting Peter. With peace restored enough to travel, he made a mission tour across Israel; the miracles he chose to incorporate into his text continue to parallel Jesus' healings.

**Acts 9:33–34 “In Lydda, he found a man named Aeneas, who had been paralyzed and bedridden for eight years”** Lydda was twenty-five miles northwest of Jerusalem. In the Old Testament, the town was called Lod (1 Chronicles 8:12), and then after their return from Babylon it became a western boarder for Jewish settlements. It became town of smiths or craftsmen, and by the time of the New Testament, people other than Jews lived there. Aeneas was not a Jewish name either. When Peter came across Aeneas, he had compassion on him as he had already been bedridden for eight years.

**“Jesus Christ maketh thee whole”** Luke carefully shows that Aeneas was not healed by Peter—but by the “name of Jesus Christ.” Luke does not forget that the apostles and evangelists were only mortal. His account always gives credit to God's power as the source of the miracle.

**Acts 9:35 “all that dwelt at Lydda and Saron saw him, and turned to the Lord.”** This healing was not only a great blessing to Aeneas, but it also became a great missionary tool for the Gospel. As the disciples only taught



fellow Israelites (and their kin like the Samaritans), we assume that “all that dwelt” refers only to the Israelites that were in the town.

## Peter Raises Dorcus

**Acts 9:36** “There was at Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha” Eleven miles west of Lydda, along the same road from Jerusalem to the Mediterranean Sea coast, Joppa was a big city in its day. Luke highlights a virtuous woman from Joppa, who holds the distinction of being the only named woman in the New Testament referred to by the feminine form of the Greek word “disciple / *mathetria*.” (However, the Greek suggests there were others.<sup>26</sup>) Tabitha (in Aramaic) or Dorcas (in Greek) is one of the forty-five named women in the New Testament (at least thirty of whom are described as devoted saints).<sup>28</sup> As a disciple, she broke the pharisaic restrictions against female learning, and became a pupil of Jesus’ gospel. She was a public figure among the Christian community in Joppa for her contributions of time and service to the needy: “always occupied with works of kindness and charity,” which included weaving and sewing clothing (BSB).



Healing of the Cripple and Raising of Tabitha by Masolino da Panicale. Image via Wikimedia Commons

**Acts 9:37–38** “. . . she was sick and died” After Tabitha’s death, her loved ones prepared her body for burial, and laid her body in an “upper chamber,” or room upstairs, possibly a rooftop (as the custom was to take the body outside after sunset and then out of town for burial). Two disciples went to Lydda, eleven miles away, to find Peter and urge him to come immediately, in hopes of healing or raising her from the dead.

**Acts 9:39** “the widows stood by him weeping, and shewing the coats and garments . . . [she] made” When the chief Apostle arrived, the local disciples flooded in to share with him all the good things that Tabitha had done for them.

**Acts 9:40 “Peter having put all outside”** Mourning over the dead was a dramatic display as explained in Acts 8:2 at Stephen’s burial. We do not know if the saints practiced these customs, but one rabbi recorded a prescribed precedent for widowed husbands: “even the poorest Israelite should hire not less than two flutes and one wailing woman.”<sup>29</sup>

**and having bowed the knees, prayed . . . ‘Tabitha, arise!’”** Just as Peter had watched Jesus do at the raising of Jairus’ daughter (Mark 5:40), Peter also dismissed the noisy crowd before performing the miracle of bringing one back to life. With Luke’s parallel pattern, he will also show Paul raising a young man from the dead, consistently reinforcing, with a double witness, that the Apostles followed Jesus and that God blessed them with His power and authority.

**Acts 9:41–42 “he . . . called on the saints and widows, presented her alive. And it was known throughout all Joppa”** Again the miracle had at least two purposes, the second was building faith, which assisted in their missionary work, “and many believed in the Lord.”

**Acts 9:43 “Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon”** (NIV) Peter’s choice of residence was unusual. Tanners had to live near water, and because of the horrendous smells associated with their profession, they often lived away from other people. In a list of “unclean” professions, tanning was shunned along with “a dung-collector . . . peddler, weaver, tailor, and bath attendant.”<sup>30</sup> The smell was so offensive that one of the very rare exceptions of when a woman could leave her husband, as listed in the Mishnah, included being married to a tanner. Yet, the chief apostle stayed with a tanner. Was he still working as a Tanner? Was it the only place available? Was Simon humbled through his profession to make him more open to receiving Jesus’ message? Or perhaps this is Luke’s habit of including the social outcasts in his record of disciples.

*Header Image: The stoning of St. Stephen by Gabriel-Jules Thomas, 1863. Image via Wikimedia Commons.*

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## ENDNOTES

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1. Joseph Fitzmyer, *Anchor Bible: The Acts of the Apostles* (NYC, London: Doubleday, 1998), 347.
2. Bromiley, *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4.545. Many were given their freedom prior to that age Campbell, *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, 135. Some sources record a release at age thirty, others thirty-five or forty. The process releasing a slave was known as manumission.
3. Acts 7:2, 11, 12, 15, 19, 32, 38, 39, 44, 45, 51, 52.
4. Frederick F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 191, 193. There are 6,000 differences between the Masoretic Torah and the Samaritan Torah (the first five books of our OT). For example, in Genesis 11:32, Abraham left Haran 60 years before Terah died, making him 205 years old. In the Samaritan OT, Terah died at 145 years.
5. “Church History,” 1 March 1842, Page 707. <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/church-history-1-march-1842/2> (Site accessed 6/25/19). Joseph described first meeting angel Moroni: “. . . a sudden a light like that of day, only of a far purer and more glorious appearance, and brightness burst into the room, indeed the first sight was as though the house was filled with consuming fire the appearance produced a shock that affected the whole body; in a moment a personage stood before me surrounded with a glory . . .”
6. Paul Achtemeier, *Harpers Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1985), 1994.
7. *Mishnah, Avoth*, 5:21. “. . . twenty for pursuing a vocation, at the age of thirty for entering into one’s full vigor, at the age of forty for understanding, at the age of fifty for counsel, at age sixty one attains old age. . . .”
8. Jacob Neusner, ed, *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), “mourning.” During the “*Shiva*,” or first seven days of mourning, “they were prohibited from conducting business or doing other work, from bathing, cutting the hair, engaging in sexual relations, wearing leather shoes, or otherwise engaging in pleasurable activities.” Jonathan A. Goldstein, *1 Maccabees: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday-Anchor Bible, 1976), 272. “They rent their garments and made great lamentation and put on ashes. They prostrated themselves upon the ground . . . and cried out to Heaven”
9. Raymond Brown, *Intro to the New Testament*, 296.
10. *Mishnah, Kelim*, 1:6–9. The rabbi’s taught that there were ten degrees of holiness:  
The land of Israel is holier than all lands ...  
The walled cities [of the Land of Israel]  
Within the wall [of Jerusalem] is more holy  
The temple Mount is more holy ...  
The rampart is still more holy  
The Court of the Women is still more holy  
The Court of the Israelites is still more holy  
The Court of the Priests is still more holy

Between the porch and the altar is still more holy than it

The sanctuary is still more holy than it ...

The Holy of Holies is still more holy than they.

11. Lynne Hilton Wilson, *Christ's Emancipation of New Testament Women* (Palo Alto, CA: GP, 2015), 32.
12. Max Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind* (Binghamton, NY: Binghamton University Global Publ., reprint 2001), 362.
13. Wilford Woodruff, *Millennial Star* 53:629.
14. Joseph Smith, "Discourse, 28 April 1842, as Reported by Eliza R. Snow," p. [36–40], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed June 26, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-28-april-1842-as-reported-by-eliza-r-snow/2> "Respecting the female laying on hands, he further remark'd, there could be no devil in it if God gave his sanction by healing— that there could be no more sin in any female laying hands on the sick than in wetting the face with water— that it is no sin for anybody to do it that has faith, or if the sick has faith to be heal'd by the administration. He reprovd those that were dispos'd to find fault with the management of concerns"
15. Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973, reprint 2003), 58.
16. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:500. "You might as well baptize a bag of sand as a man, if not done in view of the remission of sins and getting of the Holy Ghost. Baptism by water is but half a baptism, and is good for nothing without the other half—that is, the baptism of the Holy Ghost."
17. Fitzmyer, *Anchor Bible: The Acts*, 412.
18. Isaiah's Suffering Servant passages include: **Isaiah** 42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–7; and 52:13–53:12.
19. James Montgomery Boice, *Bible Study Magazine*, May 1989. In my CFM notes from John 1, we talked about the different Greek words as found in an ancient cookbook: 1) *bapto*, meaning to "dip repeatedly, to immerse, to submerge," and 2) *baptize*, meaning to transform or make a change, like a cucumber becoming a pickle.
20. The dating between AD 34 and 36, stems from references to Annas and Caiaphas as still involved from the persecution (John 18:13, 24–28; Acts 4:6). The first name of a high priest in the Gospels, Annas (also spelled, Ananus), ruled as from AD 6–15, and died in AD 40. Josephus identified five of his sons who also reigned as high priests in this order: Eleazar (AD 16–17) *Caiaphas*, son in law of Annas (AD 18–36), Jonathan (AD 36–37 and 44), Theophilus (AD 37–41), Matthias (AD 43), and son Ananus (AD 63). Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XX.224–51; *Against Apion*, 1.36.
21. Wilson, *NT Women*, chapter 2.
22. Acts 22:17–21 Christ in Temple; Acts 16:9–10 Man from Macedonia; Acts 18:9–10 Christ at Corinth; Acts 23:11 Christ in Jerusalem fortress; Acts 27:23–24 An "angel of God;" and 2 Corinthians 12:1–4 "third heaven" and paradise.
23. Neal A. Maxwell, *General Conference*, Oct, 1974, "Why Not Now?"
24. Russel M. Nelson, *General Conference*, Apr, 2019, "We can Do Better and Be Better."
25. In the D&C repent is mentioned 81 times, repentance 32 times, repenting 1, repented 2, repents 4, repenteth 10. In the Book of Mormon, repent is mentioned 207 times, repentance 99 times, repenting 3 times; repents 1 time, repented 35 times; and repenteth 17 times.
26. Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Understanding Paul* (SLC, UT: Deseret Book, 1983), 31.

27. Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, Ross Shepard Kraemer, ed. *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 159.
28. Of the 180 women in the New Testament, there are also 94 unnamed actual women, 14 unnamed fictional women, and 27 general references to women in the New Testament.
29. Mishnah Ketuboth, 4.4; quoting Rabbi Judah (born AD 135) who codified the Mishnah.
30. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1969), 304–305.









