**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ACTS-029. SEED SCATTERED AND TAKING ROOT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. 3. As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison. 4. Therefore they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word. 5. Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them. 6. And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. 7. For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them: and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed. 8. And there was great joy in that city, 9. But there was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one: 10. To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God. 11. And to him they had regard, because that of long time he had bewitched them with sorceries. 12. But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. 13. Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done. 14. Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John: 15. Who, when they were come down prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost: 16 (For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) 17. Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost."*

*Acts 8:1-17*

The note of time in verse 1 is probably to be rendered as in the Revised Version, on that day. The appetite for blood roused by Stephen's martyrdom at once sought for further victims. Thus far the persecutors had been the rulers, and the persecuted the Church's leaders; but now the populace are the hunters, and the whole Church the prey. The change marks an epoch. Luke does not care to make much of the persecution, which is important to him chiefly for its bearing on the spread of the Church's message. It helped to diffuse the Gospel, and that is why he tells of it. But before proceeding to narrate how it did so, he gives us a picture of things as they stood at the beginning of the assault.

Three points are noted: the flight of the Church except the Apostles, the funeral of Stephen, and Saul's eager search for the disciples. We need not press all, as if it were to be taken with mathematical accuracy. Some others besides the Apostles may have remained, but the community was broken up. They fled, as Christ had bid them do, if persecuted in one city. Brave faithfulness goes with prudent self-preservation, and a valuable part of valour is discretion. But the disciples who fled were not necessarily less courageous than the Apostles who remained, nor were the latter less prudent than the brethren who fled. For noblesse oblige; high position demands high virtues, and the officers should be the last to leave a wreck. The Apostles, no doubt, felt it right to hold together, and preserve a centre to which the others might return when the storm had blown itself out.

In remarkable contrast with the scattering Church are the devout men who reverently buried the martyr. They were not disciples, but probably Hellenistic Jews (Acts 2:5); perhaps from the synagogue whose members had disputed with Stephen and had dragged him to the council. His words or death may have touched them, as many a time the martyr's fire has lighted others to the martyr's faith. Stephen was like Jesus in his burial by non-disciples, as he had been in his death.

The eager zeal of the young Pharisee brought new severity into the persecution, in his hunting out his victims in their homes, and in his including women among his prisoners. There is nothing so cruel as so-called religious zeal. So Luke lifts the curtain for a moment, and in that glimpse of the whirling tumult of the city we see the three classes, of the brave and prudent disciples, ready to flee or to stand and suffer as duty called; the good men who shrunk from complicity with a bloodthirsty mob, and were stirred to sympathy with his victims; and the zealot, who with headlong rage hated his brother for the love of God. But the curtain drops, and Luke turns to his true theme. He picks up the threads again in verse 4, telling of the dispersal of the disciples, with the significant addition of their occupation when scattered,--preaching the word.

The violent hand of the persecutor acted as the scattering hand of the sower. It flung the seeds broadcast, and wherever they fell they sprouted. These fugitives were not officials, nor were they commissioned by the Apostles to preach. Without any special command or position, they followed the instincts of believing hearts, and, as they carried their faith with them, they spoke of it wherever they found themselves. A Christian will be impelled to speak of Christ if his personal hold of Him is vital. He should need no ecclesiastical authorisation for that. It is riot every believer's duty to get into a pulpit, but it is his duty to preach Christ. The scattering of the disciples was meant by men to put out the fire, but, by Christ, to spread it. A volcanic explosion flings burning matter over a wide area.

Luke takes up one of the lines of expansion, in his narrative of Philip's doings in Samaria, which he puts first because Jesus had indicated Samaria first among the regions beyond Judaea (1:8). Philip's name comes second in the list of deacons (6:5), probably in anticipation of his work in Samaria. How unlike the forecast by the Apostles was the actual course of things! They had destined the seven for purely secular work, and regarded preaching the word as their own special engagement. But Stephen saw and proclaimed more clearly than they did the passing away of Temple and ritual; and Philip, on his own initiative, and apparently quite unconscious of the great stride forward that he was taking, was the first to carry the gospel torch into the regions beyond. The Church made Philip a deacon, but Christ made him an evangelist; and an evangelist he continued, long after he had ceased to be a deacon in Jerusalem (xxi. 8).

Observe, too, that, as soon as Stephen is taken away, Philip rises up to take his place. The noble army of witnesses never wants recruits. Its Captain sends men to the front in unbroken succession, and they are willing to occupy posts of danger because He bids them. Probably Philip fled to Samaria for convenience' sake, but, being there, he probably recalled Christ's instructions in chapter 1:8, repealing His prohibition in Matthew 5:5. What a different world it would be, if it was true of Christians now that they went down into the city of So-and-So and proclaimed Christ! Many run to and fro, but some of them leave their Christianity at home, or lock it up safely in their travelling trunks.

Jerusalem had just expelled the disciples, and would fain have crushed the Gospel; despised Samaria received it with joy. A foolish nation was setting Israel an example (Deut. 35:21; Rom. 10:19). The Samaritan woman had a more spiritual conception of the Messiah than the run of Jews had, and her countrymen seem to have been ready to receive the word. Is not the faith of our mission converts often a rebuke to us?

But the Gospel met new foes as well as new friends on the new soil. Simon the sorcerer, probably a Jew or a Samaritan, would have been impossible on Jewish ground, but was a characteristic product of that age in the other parts of the Roman empire. Just as, to-day, people who are weary of Christianity are playing with Buddhism, it was fashionable in that day of unrest to trifle with Eastern magic-mongers; and, of course, demand created supply, and where there was a crowd of willing dupes, there soon came to be a crop of profit-seeking deceivers. Very characteristically, the dupes claimed more for the deceiver than he did for himself. He probably could perform some simple chemical experiments and conjuring tricks, and had a store of what sounded to ignorant people profound teaching about deep mysteries, and gave forth enigmatical utterances about his own greatness. An accomplished charlatan will leave much to be inferred from nods and hints, and his admirers will generally spin even more out of them than he meant. So the Samaritans bettered Simon's some great one' into that power of God which is called great, and saw in him some kind of emanation of divinity.

The quack is great till the true teacher comes, and then he dwindles. Simon had a bitter pill to swallow when he saw this new man stealing his audience, and doing things which he, with his sorceries, knew that he only pretended to do. Luke points very clearly to the likeness and difference between Simon and Philip by using the same word (gave heed) in regard to the Samaritan's attitude to both, while in reference to Philip it was the things spoken by him, and in reference to Simon it was himself to which they attended. The one preached Christ, the other himself; the one amazed with sorceries, the other brought good tidings and hid himself, and his message called, not for stupid, open-mouthed astonishment, but for belief and obedience to the name of Jesus. The whole difference between the religion of Jesus and the superstitions which the world calls religions, is involved in the significant contrast, so inartificially drawn.

Simon also himself believed. Probably there was in his action a good deal of swimming with the stream, in the hope of being able to divert it; but, also, he may have been all the more struck by Philip's miracles, because he knew a real one, by reason of his experience of sham ones. At any rate, neither Philip nor Luke drew a distinction between his belief and that of the Samaritans; and, as in their cases, his baptism followed on his profession of belief. But he seems not to have got beyond the point of wondering at the miracles, as it is emphatically said that he did even after his baptism. He believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but was more interested in studying Philip to find out how he did the miracles than in listening to his teaching. Such an imperfect belief had no transforming power, and left him the same man as before, as was soon miserably manifest.

The news of Philip's great step forward reached the Apostles by some unrecorded means. It is not stated that Philip reported his action, as if to superiors whose authorisation was necessary. More probably the information filtered through other channels. At all events, sending a deputation was natural, and needs not to be regarded as either a sign of suspicion or an act necessary in order to supplement imperfections inherent in the fact that Philip was not an Apostle. The latter meaning has been read--not to say forced--into the incident; but Luke's language does not support it. It was not because they thought that the Samaritans were not admissible to the full privileges of Christians without Apostolic acts, but because they heard that Samaria had received the word, that the Apostles sent Peter and John.

The Samaritans had not yet received the Holy Ghost--that is, the special gifts, such as those of Pentecost. That fact proves that baptism is not necessarily and inseparably connected with the gift of the Spirit; and chapter x. 44, 47, proves that the Spirit may be given before baptism. As little does this incident prove that the imposition of Apostolic hands was necessary in order to the impartation of the Spirit. Luke, at any rate, did not think so; for he tells how Ananias' hand laid on the blind Saul conveyed the gift to him. The laying on of hands is a natural, eloquent symbol, but it was no prerogative of the Apostles (Acts 10:17; 1 Tim. 4:14).

The Apostles came down to Samaria to rejoice in the work which their Lord had commanded, and which had been begun without their help, to welcome the new brethren, to give them further instruction, and to knit closely the bonds of unity between the new converts and the earlier ones. But that they came to bestow spiritual gifts which, without them, could not have been imparted, is imported into, not deduced from, the simple narrative of Luke.