



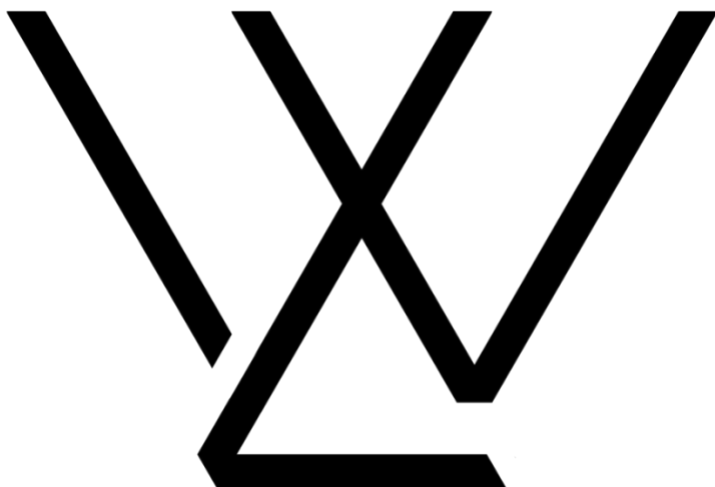
WORD TO LIFE

WEEKS 1 - 4



ACTS 7:54 - 8





Word to Life's are sermon-aligned study guides, created to help the church dive even deeper into the passages we study together on Sundays.

Each week there will be five studies to help you prepare for the upcoming weekend sermon. This will also be a great discussion tool at your next LifeGroup meeting.

We hope you enjoy and grow deeper in your faith!

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Week 1: Acts 7:54-8:8

Day 1: Heavenly Minded for Earthly Good

READ: Acts 7:54-8:8

EXPLORE:

The section of Acts that we are now taking into consideration together marks a massive shift in the story of the early Church. With the death of Stephen and the widespread outbreak of persecution, followers of Jesus were forcefully driven from Jerusalem into neighboring regions. The story of Stephen's martyrdom comes to a conclusion in Acts 7, but the legacy and example of his dying moments lived on in those who came after him. His example continues into our current day.

Stephen both understood and exemplified what it looks like to be focused on the gospel despite the difficulty of his circumstance. We could rightly say, "Stephen was heavenly minded for an earthly good."

We need to remember that Stephen was a faithful, spirit-filled witness to the truth of what had been fulfilled in and through Christ's life. The purity and authenticity of Stephen's life is further accentuated by the fact that his true witness is met with such hostility and anger. In a sense, the Jewish leaders that opposed the gospel provide a very unfortunate playbook of how to resist good news. They were handcuffed by pride, suffocated by power, and limited by their perspective of how God would work in human history.

They ground their teeth, covered their ears, yelled with a great voice, and seized Stephen. Even in their opposition, however, Stephen was greeted with the glory of God as he looked intently into heaven. We should not miss the significance of this moment. Despite severe anguish, Stephen remained heavenly minded for

an earthly good. Neither threats nor violence could keep Stephen from powerfully experiencing and courageously communicating the glory of God to a stubborn and obstinate people.

With his eyes fixed on the ascended and victorious Christ, Stephen understood what he had first experienced in Jesus. Namely, the way of heaven on earth is to willingly give one's life for another. To be heavenly minded for earthly good is to be so deeply fixated on the truths of God's kingdom that it is lived out each and every day. In Acts 7:60 we can see that Stephen was heavenly minded with an intentional focus toward his enemies! You and I, like Stephen, are designed to be heavenly minded for an earthly good.

BIG IDEA: Stephen's heavenward focus enabled him to faithfully witness in the midst of severe persecution.

APPLY:

- **Question:** What are some areas of everyday life in which you struggle to maintain a heavenward focus?

Week 1: Acts 7:54-8:8

Day 2: Beyond the Grave

READ: I Corinthians 15:1-11 and Acts 7:54-60

EXPLORE:

At first glance, the stoning of Stephen seems to have a very peculiar conclusion. The idea of Stephen "*falling asleep*" seems like an oddly peaceful ending to a brutal ordeal. The image of sleep does not seem to do justice to the violence that fills the air at the close of Acts 7. As we will explore today, this conclusion of Stephen's life is both purposeful and profound.

In Acts 7:60, Luke could have chosen another straightforward word to describe Stephen's death. Instead, he chose the image of sleep for death. This word choice has consistently puzzled scholars throughout history. Some have falsely concluded that Stephen did not truly die, but literally fell asleep. Acts 7-8 make it abundantly clear, however, that Stephen physically died.

There is nothing new about finding unique and delicate ways of describing death. Like the description of Stephen's death in Acts 7:60 as sleep, we often choose more sensitive ways of talking about death. We might say that someone has passed away, is no longer with us, is gone, or was laid to rest. We might say that an individual was called back home or that they were reunited with Christ.

The ways in which we talk about death matter. They are significant now and they were meaningful for the early Church as well. The key to understanding this verse correctly lies within the ancient Jewish context.

Throughout the Scriptures, death is often described as sleep. In today's reading of I Corinthians 15, sleep is readily understood as

a phrase that described someone who had experienced a literal, physical death. Saying that death was sleep was a way of implying that even at the end of life there is more to live. In the same way that someone who sleeps will wake again, Luke's phrasing alluded to the fact that there was more life to live for the one who had placed their faith in God.

In II Corinthians 5:6-8, Paul writes, *"So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord."* Even though Stephen's life was brought to a brutal and sudden end, we are evermore beautifully reminded that there was still more life for him to live.

BIG IDEA: Stephen's death is a powerful reminder that, for those who have placed their faith in Christ, death is a continuation of the true life.

APPLY:

- **Questions:** Why do we so often choose different phrases or metaphors to describe death? How does the way we talk about death influence the way we think about death?

- **Question:** Spend time reading, meditating, and writing about II Corinthians 5:6-8. Pray and ask for God to make you courageous in life and bold in death.

Week 1: Acts 7:54-8:8

Day 3: Godly Grief | Part I

READ: II Corinthians 1:3-7 and Acts 8:1-4

EXPLORE:

On the day that this Word to Life was written, I (Stephen) witnessed an unfortunately common reality of daily commuting. Driving early to a morning meeting, I was greeted by a rising cloud of white smoke that was barely visible around the vehicle in front of me. After only a moment or two, it was clear that there had been a massive collision only a few moments before. Both cars were destroyed. Thankfully, the passengers were safe from the wreck. With first responders on the scene, I cautiously made my way through the intersection which was riddled with an incredible amount of debris.

As I sat through that early morning meeting, I was admittedly distracted. I kept thinking about the people involved in the wreck, the debris scattered across the road, and the first responders who were already off to a busy start. Interestingly, after that meeting, I drove through the exact same intersection. This time there was no car, no shattered glass, no debris, and no sign of a wreck at all. If I had only traveled the road later, I might have never known that something disastrous had taken place. What was once a smoke-filled, debris-ridden intersection was now a calm and steady flow of cars.

This scenario made me think about how often we expect the wreckage of our lives to be cleaned up as quickly and efficiently as those wrecked cars. I wonder how often we expect and even demand a procedural, efficient, and predictable resolution to our grief and heartache. It is seldom that simple. The opening of Acts 8 reminds us that there was not only great persecution, but great grief that welled up in the early Church.

In the wake of Stephen's death, Christ followers not only mourned, but they gave him a proper burial. We need to realize that their funeral observance of the condemned criminal, Stephen was illegal according to the Jewish law. It is not an accident that Acts purposefully spends time telling of a great and godly grief that filled the believers.

This type of courageous grief should not come as a surprise to those who are familiar with the Bible. Scripture is clear; a grieving heart matters to God. The truth is that grief is a God-designed cry of our heart that the world is not as it ought to be. Unlike the early morning collision, the wreckage in our lives is seldom a quick fix. Godly grief requires time, necessitates community, and invites God to bring comfort and healing.

BIG IDEA: Godly grief takes time, requires community, and invites the comforting presence of the Holy Spirit to be our peace.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Why do you think we might be tempted to think that grief can be quickly resolved? How do you balance the tension between inappropriate quick grief and knowing when you need to move on from pain?

- **Activity:** Spend time in prayer about areas of grief in your life. Pray that the Lord would be your comfort and that His Church would be a constant source of community.

Week 1: Acts 7:54-8:8

Day 4: Godly Grief | Part II

READ: I Thessalonians 4:13-14 and Psalm 126:5

EXPLORE:

“I thought I could describe a state; make a map of sorrow. Sorrow, however, turns out to be not a state but a process.” -*A Grief Observed*

After losing his wife in 1960, C.S. Lewis anonymously published a collection of journal entries chronicling his grief and deep sorrow. It was only after his death that this famous work entitled “A Grief Observed” was published under his name. It is a profound work that takes the reader into the heart of a grieving man over the loss of his wife.

It may not be the loss of a spouse, but there is no doubt that you have experienced some form of deep and prolonged grief and sorrow in your life. It is the type of sadness that seems to revisit you daily and even keep you up at night. Maybe you have grieved over your own sin, the loss of a loved one, or a dream that seemed to die before your very eyes. The comforting truth is that when we open the pages of Scripture, we are greeted by a God who is well-acquainted with grief.

The truth is that Godly grief is a real thing, and it is also a right thing. Scripture does not encourage us to avoid grief, but rather to grieve in a way that maintains hope.¹ Godly grief does not allow the difficulty of a situation to eclipse the surpassing joy of relationship with God through Christ. In fact, the Psalmist affirms that there is a type of grief which binds our hearts to the Lord and

¹ See I Thessalonians 4:13-14 as a reference to this concept.

encourages us to trust Him deeply.² Godly grief is a vulnerable honesty about life that embraces the fact that absolutely nothing can separate us from God if we are in Christ.

Although this list is far from exhaustive, here are some potential steps that you can take as you grieve in a godly way.

- Be reminded of the nearness of God by filling yourself with Scripture, worship, and prayer.
- Share your struggle with spiritually mature followers of Jesus.
- Seek professional, Christian counseling about the areas of struggle and/or grief.
- Prioritize and protect intentional time in your schedule to rest and be spiritually rejuvenated.
- Be careful to listen to what people mean to say and not always what they say. Sometimes good intentions are poorly communicated.

BIG IDEA: Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy! – Psalm 126:5

APPLY:

- **Activity:** Read and memorize Psalm 34:17-18.

¹⁷ When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles.

¹⁸ The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.

² See Psalm 119:67 as a reference to this concept.

Week 1: Acts 7:54-8:8

Day 5: Uncomfortable Ministry

READ: Acts 8:4-8

EXPLORE:

It has been several months since we first started the Word to Life study of Acts. It is possible that you have slept since then and maybe forgotten a thing or two. Allow me to briefly remind you of one of the key moments from our early study of Acts that is unfolding before our eyes in the aftermath of Stephen's martyrdom.

In His final words to His followers, Jesus promised that the power of the Holy Spirit would fill His Church and advance the gospel into Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth. In Acts 8, the promise of Christ is being lived out by His followers. To understand this fully, we need to remember just how problematic the relationship between Jerusalem and Samaria would have been.

Even though Jews and Samaritans had shared ancestry, there was a great deal of hostility between the two groups. Samaritans were primarily descendants of the two ancient Jewish tribes called Ephraim and Manasseh. These tribes settled in a northern, fertile land and multiplied greatly. After the death of King Solomon, when Israel was split into two divided kingdoms, the divisions between tribes became clearer and more contentious. The northern kingdom contained the Samaritan people and the southern kingdom contained Jerusalem. To put it succinctly, they did not like each other.

There was shared discord and animosity between Jews and Samaritans. In the eyes of the Jews from Jerusalem, Samaritans would have been inferior, untrustworthy, and tainted. This should

serve as a reminder that it is not always the person from a radically different culture that is the hardest to love, but the nearby neighbor with whom we deeply disagree.

We would do well to remember that despite this hostility, Jesus continually challenged racial prejudice and cultural misconceptions with His life and ministry. Christ was not only aware of their cultural discord, but he also purposefully positioned His followers in areas of discomfort and even danger. Jesus promised that the gospel would advance, the Holy Spirit would bring power, and that His followers would experience persecution. Now, before our eyes, in Acts 8, the promise is coming alive!

BIG IDEA: Living out the gospel often calls us into areas of discomfort in order to follow God's plan.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Do you think the disciples would have willingly gone into Samaria if there was no persecution to move them onward? Why or why not?
- **Question:** Today's study made the point that it is often most challenging to love the person in our own proverbial backyard. Do you agree with this idea or not? Why or why not?

Week 2: Acts 8:9-13

Day 1: Eternal Freedom with Earthly Repercussions

READ: Acts 8:9-13

EXPLORE:

It was not long after the good news of Christ had advanced into Samaria that a shadowy figure emerged onto the scene. Acts 8:9 describes Simon as a man who had previously practiced magic in and amongst the Samaritans. He was mysterious and notorious at the same time. As the depiction of Simon takes full form, it becomes clear that he was a charlatan who had made a good living from tricking others and claiming greatness.

The truth is that pride will not and cannot bring about true and lasting prosperity. Simon had electrified crowds and accumulated quite a following. His magnetism was undeniable, but his life was an exhibition for his own glory. Yet, when he came face-to-face with the supremacy of Christ's power, his life was never the same. Even after he encountered true preaching, there was still quite a lot for him to unlearn.

We need to be reminded that receiving freedom from the eternal penalty of sin does not eliminate the earthly repercussions related to sin. Even though God has made it possible to receive forgiveness from all our iniquity through Christ, the earthly effects of sinful living still linger. The legacy of Simon the magician is a powerful reminder of the tragic consequences for a life built on sin and pride.

In the aftermath of Simon's life, a group of people rose up and followed his legacy into the second and third centuries. According to the historian Justin Martyr, this group that was called the

Simonians worshipped their deceased leader as a god.³ The Simonians were known for their false worship and heretical beliefs. It is possible that the Simon we encounter in Acts 8 had no connection with the later Simonian sect, but it is rather unlikely.

Simon's life represents a beautiful and heartbreaking tension that exists for all who have been redeemed from a lifestyle of rebellion against God. In the story that surrounds Simon, there is undeniable beauty in God's grace and profound heartbreak at the historical legacy that bears his name. Let his salvation story and his tragic legacy remind you of the eternal power of the Gospel and the earthly ramifications of sin. Empowered by God's grace, start today by confessing sin and pursuing righteousness.

BIG IDEA: God has made it possible for us to have eternal freedom, but there are still have earthly repercussions for sinfulness.

APPLY:

- **Question:** How do you think you can avoid these unhealthy extremes? (1) Relentlessly holding on to shame from a sin in your past (2) Taking your past decisions too lightly and not considering the severity of sin's earthly consequences.

- **Question:** In the same way that our sin can leave a legacy, righteousness leaves a tremendous impact. In what ways have you experienced the legacy of someone who lived righteously?

³ Justin Martyr, Apology 26:3.

Week 2: Acts 8:9-13

Day 2: Dangerous Miracles and Godly Signs

READ: Acts 8:12-13 and 2 Timothy 3:1-9

EXPLORE:

A lot can change in a sentence. Whether it is a conversation or a captivating story, the truth is that one sentence holds the potential to shift the entire trajectory of a discussion or narrative. This is not only true in life, but in the Scriptures as well. A lot can change in a sentence.

Simon was presented as a notorious showman who had built a large following. It is almost comical how quickly the crowd left Simon and responded to godly preaching. In just one sentence, by the power of the Gospel, everything changed for Simon and his followers. Luke writes, *“But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.”* This should come as no surprise, but there is an essential difference between the allure of Simon’s magic and the superior power of Philip’s preaching.

Simon’s preaching is not just inferior to the power of Jesus; it is fundamentally opposed to the way of Jesus. Simon’s magic was used to grab peoples’ attention, dazzle the masses and inflate his own sense of personal greatness. The Scriptures consistently speak out against this type of dangerous work.

In the Old Testament, the biblical authors consistently chose to highlight the total uniqueness of God’s power. He was the God with power like no other! In the New Testament Letters, the working of magic is consistently linked to the “works of the flesh” which ultimately keep someone from enjoying the kingdom of

God.⁴ Christian miracles are the exact opposite in their focus and in their effect.

First, Jesus did not work miracles to gain a following but to accomplish a mission. He executed the miraculous in order to illuminate His character and highlight His message. Second, the miracles of Christ served the teachings of Christ. God-honoring miracles are designed to serve the truth, not the other way around. The miraculous signs of Christ invited the crowds to diligently listen to his teaching. Finally, the salvation of a human soul by God's grace through faith is always miraculous. This is the true and great miracle!

The former followers of Simon did not become Christ followers for a new and improved magic show. They turned toward Christ as their deliverer and source of life. In our doing and in our speaking, we should remember to go and do likewise.

BIG IDEA: True and appropriate miracles serve the message of God for the glory of God.

APPLY:

- **Question:** How would you describe the summary of Philip's preaching in Acts 8:12? What is it like? How could it be contrasted with the life and message of Simon?

- **Question:** The salvation of a human soul by God's grace is a great miracle. Do you think that we can sometimes underappreciate the magnitude and mystery of salvation stories? Why or why not?

⁴ For reference, see 2 Timothy 3:1-9, Galatians 5:19, Revelation 9:21; 18:23; 21:8; 22:5.

Week 2: Acts 8:9-13

Day 3: What is Greatness?

READ: Acts 8:9-13 and Matthew 5:1-12

EXPLORE:

What does it mean to be truly great? How can we measure what greatness is and what it looks like in everyday life? Is it possible that we have praised popularity and reputation as though it was true greatness? Could it be possible that we neglect true greatness and emphasize the wrong things altogether?

When we stop to consider true greatness, it is questions like these that linger and call us to consider our own shortcomings. The honest truth is that we are, more often than not, really bad at assessing true greatness! Think about the story we have been studying this week. Simon and the crowds that followed him certainly thought he was great. His work was impressive, his reputation preceded him, and his tricks were certainly unique.

Herein lies one of the primary problems. The greatness of Simon was based on the fact that it was compared to other people. When we base our understanding of greatness in comparison with others, we can be sure that we are appreciating a counterfeit sense of importance. Sometimes we spend so much time noticing counterfeit greatness that we miss the real thing. The greatness that you and I are used to appreciating is not great at all.

Jesus highlighted this truth in the opening words of His sermon on the mount which is recorded in Matthew 5. When Jesus painted a picture of what true greatness should look like in our fallen world it included the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, and those who made peace with others. Jesus came to liberate us from the small greatness that we often admire and aspire to attain. Jesus

came to restore us to true greatness which is lived out through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

Prior to sin's entrance in the human experience, God made all of creation exceedingly and abundantly good.⁵ Don't miss out on the true greatness of Christ-like character for the mirage of lesser things. Challenge yourself to encourage true greatness in others that would otherwise go unnoticed.

BIG IDEA: Jesus came to restore true greatness and expose lesser forms of greatness.

APPLY:

- **Question:** How do you think you have been tempted to praise lesser greatness instead of the real thing?
- **Question:** When you think of the upside-down version of godly greatness that is described by Jesus in Matthew 5:1-12, who is it that comes to mind? What is it about them that truly embodies greatness?

⁵ See Genesis 1:31 for reference.

Week 2: Acts 8:9-13

Day 4: Was Simon Saved?

READ: Acts 8:9-13 and Acts 8:18-19

EXPLORE:

Historically, one crucial question about Simon has been raised from Acts 8. Biblical scholars have often wondered whether or not Simon was legitimately saved when he saw the signs, believed, was baptized, and followed Philip. At first glance, his conversion seems legitimate and miraculous. Moreover, his belief seems to be put on display in his baptism and following.

The primary problem and point of concern arose in a conversation that took place between Simon and the apostles sometime after his conversion. In Acts 8:18-19, we are told that Simon asked to purchase spiritual power from the apostles. Simon's request for spiritual power was met with a stern rebuke and call for repentance. With the full scope of Acts 8 in mind, biblical scholars have been left with the question, "Was Simon truly saved or was he only interested in the mysterious power possessed by the disciples?"

The short answer to this question is that we may never know on this side of eternity. Nonetheless, this question still holds value not only for this specific biblical text, but for our lives as well. In order to think about this question well, we have to take a quick look from both sides.

Let's consider the viewpoint that Simon was not genuine in his conversion. Because of some of the things he got wrong after his conversion, it could be assumed that Simon was only converted out of a fascination with more power. Some have pointed to his request for power and the severity of Peter's rebuke as proof that Simon was not genuine in his faith. In this way, we ought to be

reminded that it is a dangerous thing to be interested in the miracles of God and not God himself.

Even though Simon's conversion is challenging and complicated, there is some evidence to believe he was genuine. Most significantly, the biblical text mentions a familiar pattern of belief which is followed by baptism and a following. The argument for Simon's salvation is that Luke would have given us a clear indication of a false conversion if that had been the case. This particular situation is undoubtedly complex with evidence indicating different things. If Simon was indeed converted, we should remember that this was not the first and will not be the last time that God saved an unlikely sorcerer for His glory.

BIG IDEA: There is widespread disagreement about whether or not Simon was saved.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Read Acts 8:9-25. Do you think that Simon's faith was legitimate or illegitimate? Do your best to explain your reasoning using other biblical texts.

Week 2: Acts 8:9-13

Day 5: Don't Write Off the Opposition

READ: I Timothy 1:12-17

EXPLORE:

"I tried to toss the Bible and all of its teachings in the trash – I really tried."

These are the words from a woman named Rosaria Butterfield. She is a gifted writer, speaker, and tenured professor of English who loves Jesus. It wasn't always that way. As the quote above would indicate, there was a long period of Rosaria's life in which she strongly opposed the Christian faith. Over a period of many years, Rosaria's heart was melted by the grace of God as she made the difficult journey from atheism to Christianity.

Rosaria's life and words are a great reminder that we should not consider anyone as a lost cause or totally without hope. Because we believe in the God of hope and freedom, we should never write off the opposition. We should trust that the power of Christ can transform people to the uttermost.

As we continue to study the unfolding development of the early church in Acts, we will have many opportunities to encounter the God who includes the opposition on His team and into His mission. God seems to actually enjoy manifesting His glory and His redemptive power in the lives of those who might be far off. On this side of eternity, we may never know if Simon was truly saved. Regardless, we can certainly read the biblical text and observe the God who loves inviting the opposition into His kingdom.

If we are honest, sometimes we don't trust and believe that God will change the hearts of those who are passionately opposed. We tend to count people out and write people off. In this way, we

inappropriately assume that a person's opposition is too large, and God's power is too small.

This form of unbelief is often allowed to take root and grow in our hearts because of our own sense of pride. We forget about our own brokenness, our need for salvation, and our ongoing need of God's grace. God loves transforming the voice of a critic into a declaration of His saving grace. The question we ought to ask ourselves is, "Do we live and love in the same way and with the same hope?" Let's be a people who trust God and don't count out the opposition.

BIG IDEA: Our pride often keeps us from trusting that the Gospel of Jesus can transform even the hardest of hearts.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Scripture encourages us to love and pray for our enemies. When you hear that command, who do you feel compelled to pray for?
- **Question:** Apart from pride, what do you think are some reasons that we struggle to believe that God can and will change the hearts of those who oppos the Gospel?

Week 3: Acts 8:14-25

Day 1: Understanding Acts 8:14-17

READ: Acts 8:14-25 and John 3:8

EXPLORE:

It did not take long before the response of the Samaritans to the gospel reached the Church in Jerusalem. Upon the faithful witness of Jesus by Philip, many believed and followed in baptism. Yet, as the story developed, it became clear that even after their belief and baptism, the Samaritans had not yet “*received the Holy Spirit, for He had not fallen on any of them.*” This presents a series of questions that warrant deeper study.

How should we understand the fact that the Samaritans believed and were baptized without having received the Holy Spirit? What is the proper way to understand this passage?

The fact that the Samaritans had not yet received the Holy Spirit⁶ is not the normal flow of events presented in Acts. Even though John had an experience⁷ that was similar to the believers there, their experience was far from normal. Typically, the reception of the Holy Spirit is closely connected to the moment of belief and baptism. Paul’s conversion⁸ certainly follows this pattern. However, Cornelius and his fellow Gentiles received the Spirit and were subsequently baptized.⁹ Acts does not present a set formulaic pattern, but it does include a consistent combination of consistent elements.

When Acts speaks of conversion, there is a consistent inclusion of repentance, belief, baptism, and receiving the Holy Spirit. Within

⁶ See Acts 8:16 for reference.

⁷ See Acts 19:5-6 for reference.

⁸ See Acts 9:17-18 for reference.

⁹ See Acts 10:44-48 for reference.

these elements, there is variety. For example, sometimes the Holy Spirit is connected with the laying on of hands, but not always. Sometimes the believer receives the Holy Spirit prior baptism; sometimes the Holy Spirit is received following baptism. Ultimately, the Holy Spirit is integral for Christian belief and becoming.

We desperately need to notice what occurred because of this abnormal flow of events. When Acts 8 mentions that the Samaritans had not received the Holy Spirit, it is most likely referencing the outward demonstrations of Spirit-filled power. The fact that the Holy Spirit had not formally fallen does not rule out His work in their moment of belief. The delayed falling of the Holy Spirit led the Jerusalem believers to encounter and encourage true believers in Samaria. God's timing is good even when the order can sometimes seem confusing.

BIG IDEA: The Holy Spirit is integral even when the elements of conversion occur in a different order.

APPLY:

- **Question:** As you look at the various conversion moments recorded in Acts, what similarities and differences do you notice?
- **Question:** Why do you think Acts presents so much variety amongst the consistent elements that make up a Christian conversion experience?

Week 3: Acts 8:14-25

Day 2: The Falling of the Holy Spirit

READ: Acts 8:14-25

EXPLORE:

As a child, I (Stephen) can vividly remember being confused by some of the words we often sang during worship. Some profound lyrics would go right over my head and others were a little unsettling. Just imagine what it would be like if you had only a brief exposure to the biblical text and were suddenly surrounded by people singing about being *washed in the blood*.

In all honesty, there are quite a few phrases that are commonly used within the Church that can be confusing to a newcomer and a seasoned believer alike. Some expressions are simply explained, but others remain, unfortunately, unexplored and underappreciated. One common phrase that is featured in this week's biblical text is the notion of the falling Holy Spirit. We might wonder why it wouldn't be better for the Holy Spirit to just remain upright after all. Nonetheless, there is a lot of significance packed within the idea of the falling of the Holy Spirit.

The Greek word that is commonly used in relationship to the Holy Spirit's falling is *epiipto*. This verb communicates the ideas of falling upon, rushing into, or taking possession of someone. In specific relationship to the Holy Spirit, *epiipto* refers to the changing of one's impulses toward the works of God for the glory of God. In the famous parable of Jesus that is often called the story of the prodigal son¹⁰, *epiipto* is the verb that is used to talk about the way the loving father "*falls upon*" the neck of his formerly wayward son. It is a simple verb that is packed with an incredible amount of meaning and significance.

¹⁰ See Luke 15:20 for reference.

One of the best ways to understand the significance of *epiipto* in Acts 8 is to study how it was utilized in other places by the same author. In Acts 10:44, after Peter's sermon, Luke records that the *Holy Spirit fell* on all of those who heard the word. Later, when Peter recounts that same event in Acts 11:15, he says that the *Holy Spirit fell* on them as He did in the beginning of the Church. We are constantly reminded of how the Holy Spirit's power did not only descend upon people, but also powerfully indwelt the people.

When we ask the Holy Spirit to fall fresh, we are inviting God to create in us a renewed appreciation for the gospel of Christ. When we experience the falling of the Holy Spirit, we actively welcome God's loving and transformative power to have its way in our lives. In the falling of the Holy Spirit, we are reminded that the historic blessing that has been given to the Church from its inception has also been given to our hearts and lives today. Praise God!

BIG IDEA: The falling of the Holy Spirit refers to how God transforms the life of the believer with renewed passion and power.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Terminology can be challenging. What are some ambiguous terms that are often used in the Church setting? Whether in your past or currently, how have you gone about uncovering the context and/or definition of unknown terminology?
- **Question:** There are probably a lot of thoughts that arise when you hear, "*The falling of the Holy Spirit.*" What are some of the ideas that often come to mind?

Week 3: Acts 8:14-25

Day 3: Not for Sale

READ: Acts 8:18-25

EXPLORE:

It is really challenging to know whether or not Simon's faith was genuine. I (Stephen) will admit that I have written and re-written these studies as I daily wrestle with trying to understand Simon's legacy as a character. He is incredibly complicated. In one chapter, Simon seems to send us mixed signals and an overwhelmingly murky understanding of the gospel. His life presents us not with an example to follow, but a cautionary case to be avoided. Today, we will take a look at Simon's request and Peter's response.

From the time of Simon's belief through his following of Philip, it is clear that Simon remained astounded by the miraculous works of the Christ followers. The biblical text does not aim to specifically tell us what Simon saw as the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit¹¹, but it does become clear that the magician wanted in on the miraculous action. The problem was that Simon still viewed the whole matter through the eyes of a magician and not as a Christ follower.

Remember that Simon had made a living through mastery of the mysterious. It is possible that Simon simply wanted to take part in the powerful mission of the disciples or that he wanted to add the newer power to his repertoire. According to Peter, his intentions were not pure! The central idea being communicated is that the genuine working of God cannot be purchased. The miraculous power of God is not for sale.

¹¹ Acts 8:17 highlights that the Holy Spirit was received through the laying on of hands, but it does not go into sensationalized detail about what was specifically experienced or observable.

Peter's stern rebuke of Simon ought to remind us that God's Spirit is not subject to human manipulation. This was true for Simon and it is true for any profit-seeking impostor in our day as well. For Simon, issues arose because he was viewing the whole matter with a magician's eyes. His belief did not immediately translate into full and right understanding.

It is clear that if his heart's intention was not redeemed by God, he would not be able to take part in the mission of the early Church. Ironically, Peter and John were unable to give gold and silver earlier in Acts and now they refused to accept it from Simon.¹² Peter issued a stern rebuke and opportunity for repentance. The text makes it abundantly clear that his error was serious. Holy Spirit power is not for sale.

BIG IDEA: Simon's request and Peter's response remind us that the genuine working of God cannot be purchased or manipulated.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Read Acts 8:20-24. Based on what you see in Simon's response, do you think that he was genuinely remorseful or not? Pray, take notes, and talk through this text with your LifeGroup.

- **Question:** Maybe you have not offered money for a miracle, but it is likely that you have struggled to understand God's power rightly. In what ways do you think we sometimes try to either manipulate or purchase God's power?

¹² See Acts 3:6 for reference.

Week 3: Acts 8:14-25

Day 4: Drawing Near to God

READ: Acts 8:14-25 and James 4:7-8

EXPLORE:

We desperately need to experience the grace of God not only for the actions we take, but for the intentions we possess. It is clear in Acts 8:22 that Simon's intentions were wicked and he needed to repent and be forgiven. Sin is a matter of our hearts and minds departing from God. It follows, therefore, that repentance is a matter of our hearts and minds returning back to God and His good design for our lives.

In James 4:7-8, we read, *“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.”* In today's study, we are going to focus on Peter's rebuke and how we are supposed to draw near to God.

First, drawing near to God is made possible when we willingly submit ourselves to God. This means that our heart posture before Him is one of agreement and willing obedience. We are not only called to willingly submit to God, but also to actively resist evil. Notice that Peter encourages Simon to actively turn from wickedness and pray for forgiveness.

Second, drawing near to God is established upon the steadfast confidence that God delights to forgive. In James 4:8 we are told that when the repentant one draws near to God, He will draw near to them. In this passage and others like it, we are reminded that God does not deal with us reluctantly, but as a loving healer who desires to make us whole.

Third, drawing near to God is based on the assurance that in the presence of God there is the fullness of joy and unrivaled satisfaction. David writes in Psalm 16:11, *“In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”* We need to realize that the atoning work of Christ on the cross made it possible for us to draw near to God from now through eternity.

Finally, drawing near to God is fundamentally a work of God in which we are called to joyfully and sincerely participate. Hebrews 10:22 is an encouragement to *draw near with full assurance and faith*. We don't naturally enjoy being rebuked, but we ought to see the extravagant grace of Christ that is made possible when we draw near with full faith and humble repentance.

BIG IDEA: God has designed our lives to consistently and faithfully draw near to Him.

APPLY:

- **Activity: Spend time reading and praying through the passages mentioned in today's study. Genuinely confess, repent, and rely upon God's sanctifying grace.**

Week 3: Acts 8:14-25

Day 5: The Prison of Bitterness

READ: Acts 8:20-25 and Ephesians 4:31

EXPLORE:

It is a dangerous thing to be imprisoned and simultaneously be convinced that you have never been freer. Whether you have realized it or not, bitterness is a backward prison that offers you freedom while keeping you enslaved. Living a life of bitterness will subtly exploit your emotion and kill your capacity for Christlike compassion. Simon did not just need a moment of conversion; he needed his bitterness to be confronted.

Peter corrected Simon saying, *“For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.”* In this rebuke, Peter uses a common Hebrew idiom *“the gall of bitterness.”* Gall is a bitter fluid that is secreted by the liver. You may be familiar with it in Matthew’s account of the crucifixion story in which Jesus was offered wine mixed with gall to numb the pain. In its full sense, *“the gall of bitterness”* is a way of expressing how Simon was excessively filled with bitterness and wickedness. Sadly, Simon is not the only one who struggles with the prison of bitterness.

Bitterness is an often experienced but seldom-addressed struggle that is allowed to grow in our lives. It is like a soul that has been soured by sin. Whether it is resentment, anger, jealousy or other sins, bitterness is often allowed to fester in our hearts. The sin of bitterness often likes to convince us that we are bringing judgment on others while we are truly damaging ourselves.

Bitterness is allowed to thrive in our hearts because of lies we believe. First, we believe that bitterness will be the means by which we receive peace and satisfaction. This is a lie we ought to notice and unrelentingly reject. Second, we believe that bitterness

is needed because God is delaying His judgment. When you choose to live free from bitterness, you necessarily have to trust God as the ultimate healer, authority, and judge. Finally, we believe the lie that bitterness is the best use of our limited time. Realize how much time and energy is spent disliking or disdaining another person and ask that God would make you more like Christ.

Paul, in Ephesians 4:31, encourages us to let ALL bitterness be put away from us so we can be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving. When John and Peter encountered bitterness and iniquity, they did not just perform a miracle; they called for repentance. Repent of bitterness and realize that when you do, you have the blessing to reflect the forgiveness that you first encountered in Christ.

BIG IDEA: All bitterness needs to be acknowledged and rejected so we can reflect the forgiving power of Jesus in our lives.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Life seems to give us plenty of opportunities to be bitter. What are some examples from your life in which you wrestled with bitterness?
 - *This may be something to discuss with your LifeGroup and ask them for communal accountability.*

- **Question and Activity:** What are some common justifications that we give for persisting in a spirit of bitterness toward others? As you list them, pray that God would bring conviction and a genuine spirit of repentance to your heart.

Week 4: Acts 8:26-40

Day 1: The Gospel on the Move

READ: Acts 8:26-40

EXPLORE:

The story of Philip and the Eunuch that we will be studying this week falls in the wake of the Samaritans' version of the Pentecost moment. Through the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch we can see plainly that the gospel is on the move. To appreciate this truth fully, we need to slow down and explore some of the unique details in this passage.

Whether we realize it or not, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is a skillfully preserved moment in time that is filled to the brim with intentional detail. We need to notice that Luke is going out of his way to give us a clear picture of what took place. No word is accidental.

First, we are told that the man traveling along the road was an Ethiopian. This geographic reference is not to modern-day Ethiopia, but to an ancient kingdom of Meroe. It was a wealthy region that flourished from the 8th century BC to the 4th century AD. It is important to know that Ethiopia was considered the figurative *end of the earth* in the mindset of the early Greeks and Romans. The movement of the gospel from Jerusalem through Samaria to those who represent the *end of the earth* is not coincidental.¹³ It is the continuation of what Jesus had promised.

Second, we are told that the man who was traveling was a eunuch. Most likely, this man would have been castrated as a boy in order to work in and amongst the royalty. Even though this practice was common in the ancient contexts, it was inhumane

¹³ See Acts 1:8 for reference.

and complicated. According to Jewish customs¹⁴, this man could not have become fully accepted as a practicing Jew because of his physical condition. Nonetheless, his life was open to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Third, the narrative details highlight the status, education, and responsibility of the Ethiopian eunuch. He was a manager of treasure and was purposefully positioned inside the chariot. He not only possessed a scroll of Isaiah; he was able to read it. We can conclude that he was wealthy and well-educated. His soul was searching for understanding and it was satisfied in Christ.

I want you to notice that his ethnic background, physical condition, and socio-economic status could not keep him from responding to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The obstacle to his baptism and inclusion into the family of God was his belief, not his background. This story marks a monumental advance in the Christian movement. The gospel was and still is on the move!

BIG IDEA: Regardless of ethnic, physical, or socio-economic roadblocks, the gospel is capable of surpassing barriers. The real difference maker is belief.

APPLY:

- **Activity:** How would you answer the eunuch's question in Acts 8:36? What are the right barriers to baptism? Use Scripture to defend your answer.
- **Question:** Today's discussion of background details was a certainly limited and selective. As you read Acts 8:26-40, what other aspects of the story and/or characterizations stand out to you as significant?

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 23:1 and Isaiah 56:3-5 provide a brief insight into the complexities of being a eunuch.

Week 4: Acts 8:26-40

Day 2: Let Obedience Motivate You

READ: Acts 8:26-30 and Matthew 7:24-27

EXPLORE:

When the Apostle Paul was encouraging the Church in Corinth, he wrote, *“Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor for the Lord is not in vain.”*¹⁵

The truth that Jesus embodied, Philip emulated, and Paul encouraged is this: Let obedience to God be your motivation in life. In the setting of Acts 8, Philip was called even farther out of his comfort zone into the mission of God. Philip’s willingness to listen and respond rightly ought to remind us that we are called to radical obedience in this life!

Have you ever wondered how many lesser things we allow to motivate our lives rather than the desire to be used by God? How many times have you and I allowed discouragement, fear, or uncertainty keep us from being motivated by obedience? How often have we refused to follow God because we did not have the full plan at the beginning? Into these questions and more, Philip shows us what it looks like to be motivated by obedience.

When the angel visited Philip at first, he was given a destination without the details. Specifically, God had called him to an obscure and inconvenient place. Rather than requesting more information, Philip rose and went obediently. We need to notice that Philip did not rely or wait upon his own full understanding in

¹⁵ See I Corinthians 15:58 for reference.

order to respond in obedience. If you are anything like me, we often delay obedience because of limited understanding.

The unfolding story of Philip's obedience is a powerful reminder that God sometimes unfolds his plan in parts. It is the graciousness and kindness of God to have His plan revealed in segments and not the whole. Our motivation should be foremost toward obedience.

It was only after Philip faithfully obeyed in the first step that he was able to freely hear and respond to the next command. When Philip was called to go, he went. When he was called to meet the Ethiopian, he did so willingly. To the outside observer, Philip's life may have seemed crazy and even reckless. For those who have encountered the grace of God in Christ, however, his willing obedience is the only rightful response from a life that has been transformed by the Gospel. Allow the Holy Spirit to turn obedience into your primary motivation.

BIG IDEA: We are designed for lives that are motivated by obedience toward God.

APPLY:

- **Question:** In your own words, why do you think God sometimes calls us to obey when we are only given a part of the big picture?

- **Question:** What are some practices that can strengthen your ability to be motivated by obedience first and foremost? Write down some thoughts and ask for accountability from your LifeGroup.

Week 4: Acts 8:26-40

Day 3: The Value of Learning in Community

READ: Acts 8:30-40

EXPLORE:

God's Word was designed to be read, explored, and applied in His community. Unfortunately, this basic biblical practice is sometimes neglected altogether. We live in a cultural climate that often values the individual over the community. It can be difficult for us to recover the biblical practice of communal growth and learning. Regardless of our difficulty, we can see this principle played out in the conversation between Philip and the eunuch.

After running to meet the eunuch, Philip asked the question, "*Do you understand what you are reading?*" Following the all-too-familiar pattern in the Scriptures, the eunuch replied with a question of his own. "*How can I, unless someone guides me?*" This simple dialogue highlights a theme that runs throughout both Luke and Acts. Namely, understanding the Scriptures properly requires a Christian interpretation.¹⁶

God had already positioned the eunuch within the profound work of Isaiah that ultimately pointed toward Christ. The well-educated Ethiopian man was certainly able to read, but he needed a Holy-Spirit filled guide to help him understand the passage fully. Ultimately, it was the working of the Holy Spirit that positioned these two men, and it was the Holy Spirit that brought a full understanding through Philip.

We should not misunderstand what is being demonstrated in Acts 8. The Holy Spirit is God's chosen instrument to reveal His word

¹⁶ See Luke 24 for reference to the need for a Christian interpretation of the Old Testament Scriptures.

and bring transformation within His community. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would come and bring clarity to His people.¹⁷ We were never meant to follow Jesus alone. It is the Holy Spirit that magnifies Christ and illuminates His Word within the community of His people.

Scripture is designed not only to inform what we should learn, but also how we should learn. Unfortunately, we tend to move back and forth between different, unhealthy extremes. Either we study Scripture in isolation from other people or we assume that we cannot understand anything apart from another person's insights. Both of these unhealthy patterns will limit our ability to reflect the love of Christ as we rightly explore and apply His word. Don't do it alone. Embrace a lifestyle of dependence upon the Holy Spirit and reliance upon the community of faith in which God has placed you.

BIG IDEA: Scripture is meant to be read, explored, and applied in Christian community.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Today's study highlighted the two extremes of isolated independence or debilitating dependence. Of the two extremes, which are you more likely to fall into regarding biblical understanding?
- **Activity:** This week, set up a time to read, explore, and apply Isaiah 53 with a group of people. What did you learn about the biblical text? What did you observe about learning in community?

¹⁷ See John 16:13 for reference to Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit.

Week 4: Acts 8:26-40

Day 4: The Curious Case of Verse Thirty-Seven

READ: Acts 8:34-38

EXPLORE:

I wonder if you have ever had the experienced of reading the Bible alongside someone who uses a different translation than your own. If you were unaware of different translations, this event could certainly be puzzling. Sometimes different translations are helpful. On other occasions, however, the differences can be a little more curious and even confusing. If you look to Acts 8:36-38, you will most like notice something peculiar. Unless you are reading the KJV or the NKJV, you will notice that verse thirty-seven is nowhere to be found. In today's study we are going to discuss the Bible verse gone missing: the curious case of verse thirty-seven.

One of the favorite arguments of the skeptic is the historical reliability of the New Testament. It is important to give a quick word of caution. We should not view this missing verse like a scandal or conspiracy. We also do not have employ wishful thinking or ignorant optimism. As believers in the Creator of truth, we do not have to fear the truth. The issue is complicated, but its solution is rather straightforward. As we will find, there are logical explanations for this curious case that do not mean our Scriptures are unreliable.

Before we begin, it is important to note that the biblical text has received more scrutiny than any other ancient document in history. By every implemented metric, the historicity of the Scriptures has proven uniquely and supremely reliable. From sections of ancient papyri to complete collections of the Bible verified within the first few decades BC, the Scriptures have been relentlessly tested, heavily scrutinized, and consistently verified.

One of the fields of study that works to study biblical manuscripts is called textual criticism. Textual criticism is the study (art and science) of how the historically collected manuscripts should be brought together to form one complete reading of the Bible. Many of those studying textual criticism love the Lord and are doing their best to provide the Church with God's Word. These professionals study manuscripts from different dates, languages, geographical locations, and conditions to provide a clear picture of the biblical text as it was written originally.

With this in mind, here is most likely what took place in the curious case of verse thirty-seven. Based on the best manuscripts and research, Acts 8:37 was not in the original wording of the Bible. The reason that this verse may be included in the footnotes of your Bible is because the wording does appear in some of the ancient manuscripts. It does not, however, appear in the earliest manuscripts or those that are of the highest quality. For this reason, the ESV, NIV, NASV, NLT, and NRSV do not include Acts 8:37. There is simply not enough evidence or credibility for this verse to be included in our Scriptures.

The question lingers. Why would Acts 8:37 be added if it was not most likely an original wording?

The verse seems to fill out a gap that exists in the story between the eunuch's request for baptism and Philip's response. The verse seems to fit with the flow of the chapter altogether. An emphasis on belief preceding baptism was featured earlier in the Samaritan revival. As this story was told throughout Christian history, it is probable that the phrasing of Acts 8:37 was inserted later. It is important to note that this textual variant does absolutely nothing to change or challenge a right theology of baptism. The mystery we considered today does not, in any way, warrant a disposal of the biblical text, a disregarding of God-honoring textual criticism, or a disparaging of Scriptural doctrine.

BIG IDEA: There are good reasons to believe that (1) the biblical text is trustworthy and that (2) Acts 8:37 is not an uncontroversial later addition to the narrative of Philip and the eunuch.

APPLY:

- **Further Research:** Today's study did not aim to be comprehensive. See the articles below for further research.
 - **Online Article:** *The Biblical Canon* by Michael J. Kruger (The Gospel Coalition)
 - **Online Article:** *What is Textual Criticism?* by Blue Letter Bible
 - **Audio:** *Can we skip the parts not in the original manuscripts?* by John Piper (Ask Pastor John) 11 Minutes
 - **Audio:** *If the Bible has been added to can we trust it?* by John Piper (Ask Pastor John) 8 Minutes
 - **Book:** *Why trust the Bible?* by Greg Gilbert

Week 4: Acts 8:26-40

Day 5: Mission Accomplished: Moving on for God's Glory

READ: Acts 8:39-40

EXPLORE:

The conclusion to the Ethiopian eunuch story is rather surprising. Only moments after being baptized, Philip was snatched up by the Holy Spirit and supernaturally transported to a different area. If that wasn't peculiar enough, the response of the eunuch is astounding. Instead of being shocked or terrified, he was filled with joy as we went on his way. How are we supposed to make sense of this odd conclusion to a very powerful story in Scripture?

When we consider the Old Testament, supernatural transportation is nothing new. After living a life of diligent faithfulness walking with God, Enoch was taken up by God.¹⁸ On several occasions, supernatural transportation by the Spirit of the Lord was promised to provide safety.¹⁹ In the life of Ezekiel, supernatural transportation was utilized to provide visions and even rebuke.²⁰ This mode of travel was not only present in Old Testament, but it is also visible in the Greek Scriptures.

In John 6:15-21 the boat that the disciples were using with Jesus immediately reached its destination. In I Thessalonians 4:15-18, we are told that the Church will be caught up together with Christ. Most notably, in Luke's account of the Gospel, Jesus vanished from the sight of those with whom he was sharing a meal.²¹

Similar to the examples that came before him, Philip was mysteriously transported from the sight of the Eunuch to a

¹⁸ See Genesis 5:22-23 and Hebrews 11:5 for reference.

¹⁹ See 1 Kings 18:12 and II Kings 2:16 for reference.

²⁰ See Ezekiel 3:14 and 8:3 for reference.

²¹ See Luke 24:30-31

collection of coastal cities in the north.²² Philip's experience demonstrates a key principle that can be seen throughout the Scriptures. The goal of this type of mysterious transportation is not the transportation itself. HOW these biblical figures were moved matters less than the fact THAT these characters were moved for God's glory.

Notice that the eunuch did not sit and marvel at the transportation, but the God who made the transportation possible. The eunuch marveled at God's saving grace. Acts 8:39-40 is not about supernatural travel, it is all about moving on for the glory and mission of God. Herein lies a crucial point. The Jesus follower on mission will come and go by the moving power of the Holy Spirit. It is fundamentally a supernatural work of God to have sinful men and women saved by grace through faith and included in gospel ministry! As in the days of Enoch, Elijah, Ezekiel, the disciples, Jesus, and Philip, you and I are called to be moved by the Spirit of God in the mission of God.

BIG IDEA: The purpose of divinely provided supernatural travel is not the travel itself, but the God to whom the travel points.

APPLY:

- **Question:** One of the arguments for Philip's mysterious transportation was that his mission with the Ethiopian was complete. What evidence do you see in the passage for God's mission being accomplished?

²² Azotus was the Old Testament city of Ashdod.

- **Question:** As you look through the Old and New Testament references in the footnotes, what common themes do you see?

- **Question:** Where do you sense God calling or moving you to act as you play a part in His mission?



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