

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 19, Chapter 8

We have a wide variety of issues that are going to come up today in Acts chapter 8 that I think you'll find interesting. Last week we concluded Acts chapter 7 with the stoning death of Stephen, the first disciple of Christ to die as a martyr. Sadly, like his master Yeshua, Stephen's death was at the urging of his own people, the Jews. And as with Yeshua, the underlying issue that brought-on Stephen's execution was one of a fierce disagreement over **halakhah**; Jewish law. To be clear, the particular **halachic** issue in question had to do with Yeshua's declaration as being the Messiah, something that only a small minority of Jews at that time accepted. But it also serves to highlight just how sensitive was the issue of Biblical interpretation, Oral Torah, such that too much disagreement could literally lead to loss of life.

We've had some in-depth discussions about the Synagogue, and about Oral Torah also known as Tradition. And that Oral Torah was but interpretations of the Torah of Moses; however then, as now, the interpretations as given by revered Rabbis and especially when eventually written down into the Mishnah and Talmud, are considered as divine as is the original Torah given on Mt. Sinai. So now let's learn another term: **halakhah**. Usually it is said that this word means Jewish Law; and Jewish Law is referring not to the Bible but rather to rulings made by Rabbis. However we need to nuance that just a bit so as to properly understand what is in the minds of the Rabbis and lay Jews when that term is employed.

Halakhah more literally and appropriately means, "The path that one walks". Certain rulings and laws define that uniquely Jewish path and set down boundaries. The word **halakhah** is derived from the Hebrew root word **heh-lamed-kaf**, which means to walk, or to travel or to go. Thus **halakhah** represents the overall legal code of conduct that Jews are supposed to live by. If you were to ask a Rabbi where the laws of **halakhah** come from he would tell you that they come from three sources: the Torah of Moses, Oral Torah, and long held customs some of which are so old and obscure that no one really knows when they started or why they were begun. However, as I have taught you over the last several weeks, from the Jewish perspective, you cannot stick a sheet of paper in between the Torah of Moses and Oral Torah (Traditions), because they are seen as essentially one in the same substance. Now academically (which is how I am speaking at the moment) a Jewish scholar would parse his words and agree that from a technical viewpoint the Torah of Moses is indeed a different and older document than the Talmud. And customs aren't quite the same things as the Torah of Moses or even the Bible interpretations that have become lawful Traditions. But in practice, and in weight, the Torah of Moses, Oral Torah and customs are all seen as generally equally valid and authoritative.

But even more difficult to grasp, especially for gentile Christians and students of the New Testament, the terms used for these 3 sources of **halakhah** (the Torah of Moses, Oral Torah, and customs) are commonly used by Jews interchangeably. And we will find that Paul, especially, in his epistles will often use terms like law and customs and traditions

interchangeably. Why? Because that was merely the everyday mindset and the common way of speaking among Jews in New Testament times. Thus depending on his audience and his purpose, Paul (who was himself a scholar) would use these Jewish terms as commonly spoken among ordinary Jews in casual conversation, or he might get more technical and nuanced as he dealt with the deeper matters of Scriptural truth.

So as we go forward just understand that what **halakhah** means to the Jewish world is the overall body of laws that governs Jewish life. And these laws are set down almost exclusively by Rabbis, hence the nickname rabbinical law or Jewish law. Thus when a Jew speaks of **halakhah**, rabbinical law or Jewish law, these all mean the same thing. And as we reach the time of Yeshua, **halakhah** consisted mostly of the rapidly developing Traditions (Oral Torah) of the Synagogue leaders. Be aware however that not all Rabbis and Synagogues believed in the same Bible interpretations; they didn't all go by some universally accepted **halakhah**. Part of the reason that there were so many Synagogues located in Jerusalem is because so many different Rabbis taught their own interpretations as superior to any other. It is no different than in Christianity whereby we can all say that we are Christians, yet at the same time we have several thousand denominations none of which agree with the others on all points of Biblical interpretation. And the disagreements are often perceived as being strong enough that we don't believe we can worship together comfortably. Thus Christianity finds it necessary to divide ourselves into many denominations and churches. This is essentially what Jewish life and religion was like at the time of Christ.

One more associated Jewish term and we'll move on. In Hebrew the word for commandment is **mitzvah** (**mitzvot** is plural). So in the Torah we find that as Moses is receiving God's instructions on Mt. Sinai, the rules he is receiving are called **mitzvot**: commandments. Thus in **halakhah**, individual rulings and instructions of the Talmud (the written rulings of the Rabbis) are also called **mitzvot** because in Judaism they generally carry the same weight as do the commandments given by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai. And, it has become so in Judaism and Christianity that the English words law and commandment have become synonymous and interchangeable; a law is a commandment and a commandment is a law. So today when a Jew speaks of **mitzvot** he's not so much thinking of Mt. Sinai, rather he's thinking about the many rulings and laws of the Rabbis. However just to confuse things a little more, the word **mitzvah** can mean something else; it can mean doing a good deed or an act of kindness. I'm sorry to tell you that even this gets nuanced to another level; but I'm also happy to tell you that we won't go there today!

Our little walk down an avenue of everyday basic terms used in Judaism is for one purpose; to help you understand the substance of Judaism and the Synagogue as it was in Christ's era and in the era of the Apostles. These terms and their meanings that have your heads spinning right now were as well understood for them, as how to turn a water faucet on and off is for us today. The Jewish people, and the Jewish writers of the New Testament, didn't have to think deeply as they used and communicated these terms; the context of the conversation dictated exactly how to understand their meaning. It was instinctive, automatic, easy. At the same time, the NT era Jews also weren't speaking or thinking in terms of explaining Judaism and Messiah to gentiles whether contemporary to them, or from decades to hundreds of years later. It is our problem and our task as modern day Believers to dig and research and find out what these

terms meant to those Jews who wrote them. Of course the easy way out (a truly false way) is to declare a Christian doctrine that says that Scripture is so mystical that whatever it means to whomever reads it, in whatever culture or language, in whatever period of history we might live, is what it means; no context is necessary. So we are told not to worry about what the writers intended. It is no wonder that Christianity has become a disjointed armada of rudderless ships aimlessly wandering on a stormy sea, having lost its direction, purpose, and first love. Let's keep moving forward in the hope that we can help to right that ship and get back into God's will for His worshippers.

Open your Bibles to Acts chapter 8.

READ ACTS CHAPTER 8 all

Luke minces no words about his personal friend Paul. He says in verse 1 that Paul was in full agreement with the execution of Stephen. Different Bible versions will use different terms to characterize Stephen's execution: killing, death, or even murder. The Greek word that is being translated is **anaireses**; it means to destroy, kill or murder. This Greek term is meant to denote an unjustifiable death or the destruction of something that is undesirable. So while Stephen's execution was indeed legally sanctioned by the Jewish High Court, none the less Luke makes it clear that this death was not justifiable; it never should have happened. As we learned in Acts 7, it took false witnesses making up false accusations to get Stephen condemned. But even if the charges had been true, to raise his "crime" to the level of blasphemy of God, thereby giving cause for capital punishment, is itself dishonest and unjustifiable.

Verse 1 continues that the execution of Stephen opened the floodgates of persecution upon the Believers living in Jerusalem. The result was that most of the Believers fled Jerusalem, however the 12 disciples remained behind. I want to address the sensitive issue of characterizing and labeling the believing community in Jerusalem. Almost all Bibles will say something like: **"And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem"**. The word I want to focus on is church. The Greek that is being translated is **ecclesia**; it is a rather generic word that means an assembly. It can denote any kind of assembly. In our case this is, of course, an assembly of believers in Yeshua. So what's the problem with using the term "church"? First, I think that David Stern's translation of "Messianic community" far more appropriately characterizes the assembly. These were exclusively Jewish Believers who were being persecuted. Second, the term "church" is anachronistic; that is, no such thought of the word "church" as referring to a unique religious system based on Jesus Christ would exist for hundreds of years. So inserting the word church is to read backward into the holy text something that didn't exist in that era.

Church was originally a Latin word that meant assembly. So as with the Greek **ecclesia** it could apply to most any kind of assembly for any purpose. Later the term "Church" was co-opted and became by default a term for the members of a new Rome-based, gentile religion that worshipped Jesus. This targeted use of the term church developed only after gentiles wrested control of the Yeshua movement away from the Jews, and after it became centered in Rome, and after it became a thoroughly gentile religious institution. So, to call the initial group of Jewish Believers in Jerusalem the church is paint an intellectually dishonest picture, and

frankly is an insult to the memory of those first Jews whose persecution for their belief in Christ we are now reading about. The reality is that this was about one sect of Judaism being opposed and bullied by other sects of Judaism.

It was important that despite the bulk of the Believers leaving Jerusalem to avoid persecution (in whatever form it was taking) that we find the 12 disciples remaining there, because it permitted the core leadership of the Believing community to hang on to its position of authority, and thus to keep the movement alive and retaining an official direction.

So it is with the backdrop of suspicion, danger and persecution that we find some courageous Believers nevertheless stepping forward to claim Stephen's body to give him a proper burial, and then to go through the customary Jewish mourning rites to honor him. There is little doubt that the reason the local Believers performed his funeral is because Stephen had no immediate family show up to do the sad task. Whether they stayed away out of fear, or because they saw Stephen as a traitor, or there just wasn't any family nearby we don't know. However it is the duty of immediate family to deal with the death of a loved one. Even so, Jewish tradition is that a corpse has to be buried by sunset; so word couldn't have yet reached Stephen's family up in Samaria, assuming he had family there.

Verse 3 contrasts the caring nature of the 12 disciples to properly bury their brother in the faith, Stephen, to the cruel Paul who hunted down frightened Believers in their own homes, taking them into custody. I again remind you; these Believers who were being pursued had committed no crime. The issue was over **halakhah**; the Messianic sect followed different Bible interpretations (ones taught to them by Yeshua) than the other sects of Judaism did. And the main point of disagreement was the same one that exists to this day: who is the Messiah? The description of Paul's actions is further proof that Paul was operating in some kind of an official capacity for the Sanhedrin. Certainly any arrest would have been by court order; a private citizen couldn't just go out and arrest people as they saw fit. And equally as certain the Romans wouldn't have had any involvement as this was strictly a Jewish religious matter; no breach of Roman law had occurred and there was no threat to Roman sovereignty from the Believers.

Do not get the idea that this persecution of Believers was the first or only violent in-fighting between factions of Judaism that occurred over matters of **halakhah**. One of the most infamous incidents of struggles among Jewish factions occurred between two of the greatest rabbinical academies in the Holy Land; that of Hillel and the other of Shammai. They were rivals and each taught a **halakhah** that differed from the other in some important ways. Just before the Jewish revolt that led to the Roman destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in 70 A.D., an intense confrontation arose between adherents to these two schools of Jewish thought over the matter of a proposal called the Decree of Eighteen Things. This was a proposal that would establish several important rabbinical rulings that affected some sensitive issues of **halakhah**. The disagreement over its contents (and we don't know what, exactly, was in that document) was so severe that a number of disciples of the school of Hillel murdered a significant number of disciples of the school of Shammai in order to stop the proposal from going to a vote.

As are so many things with God, the result of this persecution of Believers produces the opposite results from what man intended. Those Believers who were chased out of Jerusalem didn't go into hiding; they merely went elsewhere and began to spread the Good News of Yeshua. Let's be clear; for the moment, the persecution was limited to Jerusalem. So the Believers fled to other villages and towns in Judea, Galilee, and even to Samaria as we hear with the story of the Believer Phillip.

Verse 5 says that Phillip went to a city in Shomron; Shomron being Hebrew for Samaria. This Phillip is not the Phillip of the original 12 disciples; rather he is the Hellenist Believer Phillip who was one of the 7 men chosen to deal with the food distribution to the widows. We know this by deduction since verse 1 explains that the emissaries (meaning the 12 disciples) stayed in Jerusalem while the others fled. This means that Phillip was a Greek speaker, and Greek was a language commonly spoken in Samaria. No doubt Phillip knew some Hebrew and Aramaic as well, so he was a good candidate to go to Samaria and preach the Gospel.

Phillip's destination also shows that the Believers had adopted their Master Yeshua's view that the Samaritans were just as worthy as others to be told of the Good News, despite the fact that Samaritans were considered unclean and traitors to Judaism. Nevertheless Phillip in the power of God healed and drove out unclean spirits in Yeshua's name, and this caused the Samaritans to listen to what he had to say. Remember: the Samaritans were not considered Jews. In fact, exactly what they were is not easy for us to define, and neither was it for people of that era. There was a thread of Jewishness, but an equally large thread of gentile-ness in Samaria's population. So in the eyes of Judaism, Samaritans were an unclean mixture, an ungodly hybrid. They weren't quite Jews, and they weren't quite gentiles.

The Samaritans created a huge problem theologically for the Rabbis that would continue on for centuries, such that the Talmud devotes an entire section on how to deal with them; it is called Tractate ***Kutim***. ***Kutim*** are what the Jews called the Samaritans, and this was because the city of ***Kutah*** was where many foreign immigrants were brought in by the Assyrians to repopulate the land. What is interesting is that in Tractate ***Kutim*** while the Rabbis say that Samaritans are to be excluded from the Jewish community because "they have become mixed up with the priests of high places", that in fact they can re-join the Jewish community if "they have renounced Mt. Gerizim and acknowledged Jerusalem and the resurrection of the dead". So what we see is that the issue for the Rabbis about the Samaritans had far less to do with them being a mixed genealogy of Hebrews and gentiles, but rather that the Samaritans didn't practice any kind of accepted, traditional Judaism. They practiced a religion based on their own version of the Torah of Moses, yet they didn't believe in the Prophets of Israel. But even without accepting the Old Testament Prophets, the Samaritans were still expecting a Messiah largely because of Moses saying that in time a "prophet like me" would arise. I think it a reasonable assumption that Moses' statement would have been the basis of the approach that Phillip took in delivering the Good News to the Samaritans since while they revered Moses, any talk about fulfilling the Prophets of the Bible (something they didn't accept so they weren't familiar with them) would have ended the conversation.

Phillip's approach to true evangelism is a great application lesson for all modern day Believers to consider. When we are speaking to non-Believers about Christ it is important that we

approach them on their terms and in the context of what they understand and are capable of hearing and absorbing. We find Paul doing exactly this on more than one occasion. This is why the more typical Western Evangelical Christian approach of presenting the Romans Road or other such Gospel formulas as found on Tracts to explain one's need for redemption is only useful if the un-Believer has spent some time in church and is at least a little familiar with the concepts and the lingo. Non-churched people cannot make heads or tails out of such information or of the terms we commonly use. And neither of course can Jews nor people of other religious backgrounds.

As a result of his approach Phillip had marvelous success in Samaria as we're told in verse 12 that many were immersed, both men and women. Phillip's success and the amazing signs and wonders that he performed caught the eye of a well known local magician named **Shimon**; or in English, Simon. In fact we are told that Simon became a Believer and that after he was baptized, he clung closely to Phillip. No doubt to Simon, a practitioner of the magic arts, what Phillip did made him feel like Phillip was a comrade in the profession and he wanted to learn from him how to do these signs and miracles that **Shimon** hadn't been able to.

It makes sense that Simon would practice his occupation in Samaria where every sort of belief was tolerated. This man fascinated especially the early Church Fathers, and there arose among them for centuries great debates over whether Simon was actually saved, or if he was merely an imposter. Justin Martyr who lived only a couple of generations removed from the New Testament era wrote about Simon, calling him Simon Magus (Simon the Magician), and says that Simon was from the Samaritan city of Gitta, but later he moved to Rome. In fact, the Gnostic sect of Christianity claims Simon as a kind of Gnostic Church Father. There is a hint of Gnosticism where we see in verse 10 that Simon called himself The Great Power of God; this terminology fits nicely with Gnostic philosophy.

Now things start to get quite theologically dicey for us. And I need you to be open minded about what I'm about to say to you as the association between salvation, baptism, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit varies greatly among Christian denominations and is among the most sensitive issues that causes much divisiveness in the Church. Verse 14 tells us that the 12 disciples in Jerusalem heard about what was happening in Samaria as a result of Phillip's work and so Peter and John went to Samaria to see for themselves; no doubt they were skeptical considering the frayed Jewish relationship with these unclean half-breeds. But even more, the passage in verse 15 explains that **ONLY** when Peter and John came and prayed for those who had been immersed, did they receive the **Ruach HaKodesh**, the Holy Spirit. So; are we to take from this verse that the acts of coming to faith in Christ, and then being immersed in His Name, are completely separate from the issue of being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, which seems to be the case here? I researched a wide variety of Bible translations and even some ancient Greek New Testament manuscripts; and they all come out the same. So there is no error and no disagreement over the plain meaning that these new Samaritan Believers, already baptized, had not yet received the Holy Spirit and didn't until Peter and John came to give it to them.

This issue is important for us so I want to take a moment to re-read this short passage; please follow along with me in your Bibles.

Acts 8:14-17 CJB

14 When the emissaries in Yerushalayim heard that Shomron had received the Word of God, they sent them Kefa and Yochanan,

15 who came down and prayed for them, that they might receive the Ruach HaKodesh.

16 For until then he had not come upon any of them; they had only been immersed into the name of the Lord Yeshua.

17 Then, as Kefa and Yochanan placed their hands on them, they received the Ruach HaKodesh.

It was only when Peter and John laid their hands on these already baptized Believers that they received the Holy Spirit. Notice that there is no suggestion that Phillip's baptism of them was inferior or defective or premature (that is, that perhaps they didn't quite believe just yet). There is no hint that Peter and John even preached to the Samaritan Believers to clear up any theological misconceptions that Phillip might have accidentally created. Further we usually find in the New Testament that once a disciple preached the Good News, and a person came to faith in Yeshua, if there was water suitable for immersion nearby, baptism was generally immediate. And, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit upon faith in Messiah is also usually immediate as evidenced in Acts chapter 10. So it seems reasonable to say that what we see here as regards the Holy Spirit coming later, and by means of human intervention, is an exception to the rule (if there even is a rule).

Let me add to this by saying that in Paul's case of his coming to faith in Yeshua in Acts 9, it seems that the Holy Spirit fell on him after he believed but BEFORE he was baptized. So what are we to take from all this? Most Evangelical Christian denominations say that the sequence is that instantly upon belief, the Holy Spirit indwells and then baptism comes after (sooner or later), but strictly as symbolic. Most Pentecostal Christian denominations say that, like here in Acts 8, baptism in water is a separate event from baptism of the Holy Spirit. So a person can be saved, and immersed in the Name of Yeshua, but still not have the power of the Holy Spirit in them. I'm not here to dispute any of this except to say that clearly the New Testament shows that God does NOT seem to have a rigid formula about the sequence of coming to faith, baptism, and receiving the Holy Spirit. We see it happen differently under different circumstances. And if God doesn't have a rigid doctrine about the sequence then neither should we adopt a rigid doctrine about the exact sequence, nor should we question someone's faith as insincere or incomplete because they didn't go through the same sequence that we did or that our religious leadership says they should.

Since we are temporal creatures (that is we're earthbound and controlled by time and space), then we have little choice on earth and in practice but to devise some sequence or another for ceremonial matters. That is, we have to have some order of doing things or everything is random and chaotic. Yet we also don't have to demand that our way is God's way and that there is no other way. Thus here at SOAM for instance, we expect a person to come to faith, and then to approach our Elder to request immersion. The Elder then contacts that person,

asks them to pronounce their faith to him, and discusses the meaning of water immersion with them. Once these important preliminaries are completed only then will a SOAM pastor immerse that person in Living Water. While standing in the water the baptismal candidate is to publically profess his/her trust in Messiah Yeshua to witnesses and to acknowledge their undying love and allegiance to Him. This sequence is not accomplished in the belief that what we do is the only possible God-authorized baptism protocol, but rather as a logical, practical approach that seems to meet all Biblical criteria.

But now a big question looms before us: were the Samaritans really saved? And how about Simon Magus? After all we see him being strongly rebuked by Peter in the next couple of verses. Many Christian leaders and commentators insist that what Peter did was to essentially excommunicate Shimon; so perhaps he was a Believer for a few days, but no longer. Others say that Simon is so superficial in his belief that he could not possibly have been genuine at any point.

Verse 18 begins by Simon observing that the Holy Spirit came when Peter and John laid hands on these Samaritan Believers. Apparently there was something visible and tangible that occurred that impressed Simon; but we don't know what it was and I'm not about to speculate. However afterward Simon gets excited and he wants to have this same spectacular power that Peter and John possess. After all, he was a revered magician and was used to wielding supernatural power. So he offered to give money to purchase this ability. Peter bluntly tells Simon that this is not a power that can be purchased; rather if he ever obtains it, it will come as a free gift from God. Peter continues that **Shimon** will have no part in this matter and that he needs to repent of his wrong attitude and pray for forgiveness.

From this incident there is much doubt in some quarters of Christianity if Simon was actually ever saved. My view is that from the information we are given, the Samaritans were indeed saved and so was **Shimon** saved and remained so even after Peter's strong rebuke. Verse 13 says straightaway: "Moreover, Simon himself came to believe". Look; Simon was reacting according to everything he knew from his past. It takes time to unlearn wrong things, and to drop bad habits. Simon had no previous training in the Torah, or even in Traditions, like any ordinary Jew had received because he wasn't a Jew! Everything was new to him. Only a few days earlier he was a proud pagan Sorcerer; how could he be expected to understand the finer points of his faith and of God's Word so quickly?

As for Simon, nowhere do we see anything but a repentant response from him after Peter chastised him. No arguing, debating, or denial. And we also never hear of Simon renouncing his relationship with the Lord. Simon was saved. What may have happened at a later date, outside of any Biblical information, I can't say.

But my own personal experience with the Lord has taught me something valuable. Being a Believer is an ongoing process that involves a never ending renewal of our minds. Paul calls this process being perfected; not **achieving** perfection. So don't be discouraged if you aren't moving along in your journey with Christ as quickly or smoothly as you hoped. At the same time, don't expect God to do all the work. You must make a sincere effort to learn and mature, and when you err be open to being chastised by God at times, just like Simon was. None of

this indicates that God has abandoned you nor that you don't have a relationship with Him. We should not think this of ourselves, nor should we think it of anyone who insists that they are worshippers of Christ but sure don't seem to act like it sometimes.

In today's world of anything goes, pleasure at any cost, gender confusion, sexual freedom with a lack of boundaries, insatiable hunger for wealth, self-centeredness and entitlement, and other non-Biblical lifestyles, we need to expect that new Believers who come from this background aren't going to instantly behave in a Godly manner the moment they come to faith in Messiah. We have an entire world full of Samaritans and Simons. They can only be as sincere in their new faith as they know how to be. They need training in God's Word and they need discipling and encouragement in their everyday lives, and it will likely be needed for years to come. Perhaps you can be that person who comes alongside to guide and to mentor.

We'll finish up Acts chapter 8 next time.