



*Becoming Fully Devoted Followers  
by Studying the Followers Before Us*

**WEEK 46**

# **STEPHEN AND PHILIP**

**NOVEMBER 12-16, 2007**

<b>DAY</b>	<b><i>THROUGH THE BIBLE</i></b>	<b><i>ABBREVIATED STUDY</i></b>
<b>Monday</b>	Acts 15-16, Psalm 76	Acts 5:12-42, Psalm 76
<b>Tuesday</b>	Acts 17-18, Psalm 77	Acts 6:1 – 7:53, Psalm 77
<b>Wednesday</b>	Acts 20-22, Psalm 78	Acts 7:54 – 8:1a, Psalm 78
<b>Thursday</b>	Acts 23-25, Psalm 79	Acts 8:16-25, Psalm 79
<b>Friday</b>	Acts 26-28, Psalm 80	Acts 8:26-40, Psalm 80



**READ**

Acts 5:12-42

Psalm 76

**REFLECT**

The opening chapters of the Book of Acts tell of the “explosive power of a new affection.” The Day of Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, throbbed with the excitement of the Holy Spirit’s descent. The Apostles, and 120 disciples in all, had been in focused prayer, seeking God’s direction for their future. The signs of the Spirit’s arrival with wind and flames, and the unforeseen utterances, fell on them with a heaven-sent dynamic for evangelism empowerment.

Later, Peter stepped onto a podium and addressed the amazed assembly in Jerusalem, with anointed words of explanation for the energized demonstrations of the Spirit’s effect on the disciples. He demanded a hearing, presenting Jesus as the promised Savior. He confronted the crowd with their need for this Savior. In response to their question, “What shall we do?” he preached repentance. And with passion and plain talk, he challenged them to “Save yourselves.” On that historic occasion, about 3,000 were added to the Church. Wow !!!

Together with powerful preaching and multiple miracles in evidence of God’s active presence, there was a spreading wave of converts. This produced an expanding work load for the Apostles. There was an urgency for telling the Good News story; the nurturing of the converts; and attending to the survival needs of those converts. It seemed an obvious next step was to expand the leadership team. Under the Holy Spirit’s superintendence, deacons and elders were “called out,” and deployments assigned.

Peter and his associates on the evangelism team could not be held down. They preached, they counseled, they performed healings, they challenged the religious authority. And that’s when they encountered open resistance from the Sanhedrin, led by the Chief Priest. Peter and his men were imprisoned; then miraculously escaped, only to be found

preaching in the temple. From there they were brought back for examination by the High Priest.

This was a **critical moment** in the life of the young Church. There was real “heat” in the Council chambers. The tension was palpable. “Death to these rabble rousers” was the prevailing threat. But, God had an answer to the threat in a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a highly respected teacher of the law. Had it not been for his wise counsel to the assembly, it might have been the end of the emerging Church. He was very precise in his counsel. “If their ideas are of human origin, they will collapse. However, if they are from God, you will never be able to put them down.” “Give it a chance.” That was the providential word of deliverance; they were freed!

So, Peter and the apostles, deacons and elders – in spite of the prohibition laid down by the Council – went right back to the Temple to tell the Gospel story. More converts swelled the numbers of Christ followers. And some were from a different background – Greek, rather than Hebrew. Dissensions arose, and another challenge loomed, requiring serious attention. To quell the disturbance, seven believers were called out to attend to the domestic needs of the fellowship.

Included in the seven were Stephen and Philip. The following readings will focus on these two deacons, whose brief periods of service forever shaped the “service” elements of Christian church life.

**RESPOND**

Let your mind and spirit capture the throbbing dynamic of the emerging Church. In spite of threats that might have permanently shut down the growth of the congregation of believers, observe – no, **feel** the intervening hand of God – to give power to the movement, and wisdom and courage to those who led the way. In every period of Church history, there have been God’s chosen men and women whose powerful witness and leadership have provided a new thrust for the Gospel. That pattern is not dead. So, who in our time, in our Glenkirk history, will emerge as God’s champion for the forward movement of our church?

**PRAY**

“God stands tall, and makes things right. He saves” (Psalm 76 – TM).

**READ**

Acts 6:1 – 7:53  
Psalm 77

**REFLECT**

Organizations typically develop in a consistent pattern: A seed is sown; a need is observed; a response is begun; a “program” grows. New devices, provisions, organizations, methods and personnel follow. The young church followed this sequence. The need was the care of widows, in long-standing Jewish custom for providing funds for the relief of widows. The early church took social responsibilities seriously.

Who will do the work? “Look out seven men of good reputation . . . “ Persons who live *significantly* rarely push to the front, but are *called out* to meet a challenge. They step into the challenge, and their life becomes the living out of their response. Among the seven was Stephen. We don’t know very much about him. He may have been from Alexandria, at least a Hellenist Jew. His assignment was focused on the Hellenist (Greek culture) widows and synagogues, and suggests that Christianity was not a new Jewish sect, but clearly an emerging, distinctively “Christ followers” church.

Stephen was called out because he was “full of the Spirit and of wisdom.” Even more, he was “full of grace and power,” and began to work great miracles and signs among the people. Not content to “wait tables” only, he preached in the synagogues, took on some traditionalists, and argued skillfully in defense of the Gospel. With his Spirit-inspired wisdom, he could not be out-argued. So his antagonists recruited false witnesses, accusing Stephen of making blasphemous statements “against Moses and against God.” They, along with the Jewish establishment leaders, hauled Stephen into court, the Council. As these accusers fixed their eyes on him, “his face appeared to them like the face of an angel.” Can you “feel” the intensity of Stephen’s gaze directed to his accusers? Yes, he was “filled with the Spirit.” And it showed.

We observe in Stephen no shrinking violet with a timid witness to Jesus. Here we see a disciple who was staking his life on the power of the Gospel to save, even himself. Allegations did not overwhelm Stephen. When truth is the basis of witness, there will be no fear in speaking out in defense of that truth. Stephen had clearly captured both the content and spirit of the Jesus story, and knew the historic flow of Israel’s ups and downs in observance of God’s purposes. He stood firm with courage in recounting the broad strokes of the scenario into which God needed to insert His promised redeemer. In spite of God’s patience, and with repeated attempts to bring Israel into conformity to His purposes, they consistently rejected Him. “How stubborn you are, heathen still at heart and deaf to the truth! You always fight against the Holy Spirit. . . . They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One; and now you have betrayed him and murdered him, you who received the Law . . . and yet have not kept it” (Acts 7:51-53 – *New English Bible*). You can’t witness with more boldness than this.

**RESPOND**

In the crunch of giving bold witness to your faith, do you find yourself feeling secure in your knowledge of the Gospel and its power to save? In the power of the Holy Spirit, it is possible to declare your faith with certainty and winsome power in the face of those who would oppose the Jesus story. We may not see the “glory of God” when we look up to the sky, but we can depend on the Spirit’s presence and imparted wisdom to give a redemptive word when called upon to do so.

**PRAY**

Gracious Lord, I count on the readiness of the Holy Spirit to empower me to give bold witness to my faith. Help me to experience the confident affirmation of the Psalmist who wrote: “You’re the God that makes things happen; you showed everyone what you can do” (Psalm 77 – TM).

- D.E.

**READ**

Acts 7:54 – 8:1a

Psalm 78

**REFLECT**

When Stephen “told it like it was” regarding the Jewish history of disobedience to God’s directives, the assembled officials in the Council went wild, rioting broke out, and as one translation has it, “they ground their teeth with fury” (NEB). In the confusion and angry spirit of the situation, Stephen called on his source of strength: He saw the glory of God as he looked heaven-ward, with Jesus standing at God’s right hand. When he gave witness to his vision, he pulled out the plug on his very life. The infuriated mob pulled Stephen out of the Council chamber, and stoned him until he was dead.

When life tumbles in, something usually happens to clear the air, either external or internal. For Stephen, that “something” was his vision of Jesus, and that was all the assurance he needed. He spoke openly about seeing the “**Son of Man**” standing with God. [In only one other passage in the New Testament is this term used, by Luke (22:69).] It was the vision of Jesus which truly cleared the skies, in spite of the pain of his stoning. Such an experience can’t be orchestrated; it just happened, and at a crucial moment.

When life is in danger, the most natural thing for us to do is pray. Stephen’s prayer was not a request for deliverance, but an affirmation of trust: “Lord, receive my spirit.” We too often tend to pray with desperation: Get me out; heal me; return my money; reverse my loss; spare me. However, Stephen prayed for those who were killing him. And in that, he followed the pattern of his Master. “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Clearly, such selfless praying throws a light on the man, Stephen. Against the most powerful passion for self-preservation, he claimed the sovereign rule of his spirit to forgive.

Stephen’s speech in front of the Sanhedrin did not cause his death. Rather, it was the forced confrontation of the Jewish leaders with the facts of their religious and political history, and their eruption of guilt in the light of truth, that thrust them into a stoning. Stephen might have

said: **Count One.** “Your nationalism, your customs, your reliance on ‘The Law’ of Moses have enslaved you. You’ve let your systems run away from their essential truth and usefulness. Instead of ‘saving’ you, your legalistic adherence to Moses’ Law has ‘enslaved’ you. Instead of making you good, it has simply made you dull.” **Count Two.** “Your spiritless traditions within the Temple culture have become a noose around your necks, and the vibrance of the God-man relationship is void of meaning and fulfillment.” These are pretty heavy accusations.

If Stephen had lived, he would have ranked with the greatest of the Apostles. In the “laying on of hands” at the occasion of his selection as a Deacon, he symbolically received the bestowment of the Holy Spirit to carry out his ministry. Chrysostom once wrote: “The hand of man is laid on, but all is the work of God.” So it was, indeed, with Stephen. His was certainly a brief career: weeks, months; we don’t really know. But his effectiveness in fulfilling his calling is both memorable and instructive. A person who, “being made perfect in a little while, fulfills long years.”

Let’s not forget that there was a keen observer of Stephen’s stoning. Those who threw the stones laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. He was among those who approved of the action. At this first mention of Saul, who later became Paul, we can observe a significant progressive sequence in his behavior: 1) Silent witness; 2) consenting spectator; 3) active participant as a combatant against the Jesus followers. One might consider that the witnessing of Stephen’s serenity in the face of death, was a memory Saul would interface with his own experience on the Road to Damascus.

**RESPOND**

Length of service by itself does not determine the effectiveness of one’s life. In Stephen, there is clear evidence that empowerment by the Holy Spirit, and bold proclamation of truth, can accomplish great things in a short period of time. What are we waiting for – a year-long assignment? Today’s witness to a hurting, needy soul can produce eternal values.

**PRAY**

Spirit of God, descend upon my heart. Alert me to those moments in which I may convey Your “power to save” to someone who needs Your healing. And, “in spite of our disrespect for all God has done, He is compassionate, and forgives sin; he restores” (Psalm 78).

- D.E.

**READ**

Acts 8:16-25

Psalm 79

**REFLECT**

The commotion in Jerusalem following the stoning of Stephen turned into a time of violent persecution for the community of faith. Tensions were strong, and the followers of Jesus were marked for ridicule and physical abuse. The Apostles were not shrinking violets. They had a powerful message to proclaim, and many people were finding hope and direction.

One of the new directions was to get out of Jerusalem, where there would be relative safety. So they spread into the outlying villages, the coastal towns, and ultimately to Rome. While the Apostles remained at “headquarters,” the newly selected deacons apparently followed the migration outward. And here we pick up the evangelistic ministry of Philip.

Philip was a royal name. The father of Alexander the Great was named Philip. One of the sons of Herod the Great was another Philip. And remember that Philip was among the original twelve disciples, the one who brought his brother Nathaniel to Jesus, and who is mentioned in the feeding of the five thousand event with Jesus. But now, the Philip of Acts 8 is “Philip the Evangelist,” one of the seven selected to care for the need of the widows. In the wake of persecutions being carried out in Jerusalem, this Philip headed into Samaria, preaching up a storm. This marks the first definitive initiative by the early church to venture into non-Jewish territory.

Christianity could not bloom in Jerusalem as a branch of Judaism. The persecutions forced the Jesus people outward, and they “bloomed where they were planted.” In the case of Philip’s preaching ministry, there was eager acceptance of the Good News about Jesus. Individual lives were transformed, healed, empowered to spread the word. Philip was led into an audience – the Samaritans – hated by the Jews, but with some background in Hebrew history, and scriptures. His move to

Samaria was clearly an act of God’s leadership, a plank in the platform of an expanding church. And the news from Samaria was that “there was great joy in that city.” Where authentic Christian truth is proclaimed, there is true joy, not bondage or depression.

The burden of Philip’s preaching was Christ. And because of that clear focus, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, there were multiple miracles as an outgrowth of the preaching. God’s power was being brought to bear on the multiple needs of the people, spiritual, emotional and physical. The Samaritans not only “heard” the message of Philip, they also “saw” the results in human evidence. Preaching – *witnessing* – by itself is incomplete; it must produce results in the lives of the people who hear it.

Philip the Evangelist set a pattern for ministry that is valid in our world. Certainly the early Jesus followers faced threats on life and limb, and were driven into new places for safety. Their displacement was not something they would have chosen, feeling that it was pure disaster. But as they moved out, they carried the seed of faith, and let it drop into fertile ground as they went. So Philip used the events of his history to prompt an opportunity to take the Jesus story into new territory. He was faithful. He was Spirit-empowered. And by his faithfulness he assisted in the spread of the Gospel, even to a long-distance traveler. Tomorrow, we’ll learn more about his witnessing technique.

**RESPOND**

Even during the “hard times” of life, when we can feel out of place, in a new place, or in a very unpleasant place, there is always an opportunity to share our faith in a persuasive way. Our challenge is to be “prayed up,” with a sure and clear personal story of God’s saving power in our own life, that when the occasion arises for a witness to be made, we are ready to “bloom where we’re planted,” to the Glory of God.

**PRAY**

Heavenly Father, at times when I feel inadequate as Your ambassador, remind me that “You’re famous for helping. God, give me a break. Your reputation is on the line” (Psalm 79 – TM).

- D.E.

**READ**

Acts 8:26-40

Psalm 80

**REFLECT**

Once an “expansion” movement gets underway, all sorts of new opportunities arise. It’s true for a business; it’s true for the Church. Philip was an emissary for expansion of the early church. Having gone into Samaria, new territory for the Gospel message, Philip got his next Spirit-instruction to head out to the desert, to Gaza. Not a pleasant place in Philip’s time, but in its past history, Gaza had been a flourishing city along the busy trade route between Jerusalem and Egypt. Then it was thoroughly destroyed in 96 BC, by the Maccabean army, and became a deserted place.

Obedient Philip set out on the Desert Route, and there encountered a dignitary from the Queen of Northern Africa’s court: the Secretary of the Treasury. A pilgrimage had taken him to Jerusalem, and we can only envision that part of that experience might have been an exposure to events surrounding the Christian movement. He obviously picked up a few new books, as well. One of those books was the Old Testament. And in the pattern of the ancient world, everyone who could read, read aloud. So the Ethiopian Eunuch could easily be heard by anyone passing by.

Philip, wondering why in the world God would send him out on the “Desert Route,” soon found the answer: There was a distinguished gentleman reading aloud, and he needed some help. (Philip’s ears were open, and listening ears lead to open hearts.) The conversation between Philip and the Eunuch was very direct. “Do you know what you’re reading?” asked Philip. “No, tell me all about it” said the Eunuch. And there Philip was able to share the Good News, starting from the Isaiah passage about the “Suffering Servant,” and leading to the story of Jesus, the fulfillment of the prophecy.

Here is a lesson in effective witnessing. In our time, it seems that the Church has a difficult time capturing the power to extend itself. We’re more “settlers” than we are “pilgrims.” But Philip, on fire with the

life and teachings of Jesus, and a commission to tell the story wherever he found himself, became the agent of witness to the man who became the first Gentile to embrace the Christian faith. Expansion was on the way into a new continent, Ethiopia being the extreme limit of the world, in Philip’s time.

In this episode of Christian church growth, one can observe the quality of the witness Philip gave. He approached the Eunuch as a helper. Sensitive to the opportunity for sharing important meaning, and with a winsome spirit wrapped in love, he was able to tell the Jesus story very simply. As Tertullian wrote of Christians in the second century, “See how these Christians love one another.” This is the power that grows the community of faith.

Our response to witnessing opportunities is too often indirect. We engage in small talk: Tell me about your family, work, college, club. Not so with Philip. He started with Scripture, went straight to the meat of the meal. That is not to say that one should be blunt, and burst in when there is no evidence of an open heart and mind. But it does say that our witness should be motivated by getting to the issues in order to get a response to the message. Talk by itself is empty. But honest talk supported by character and directed by intelligent understanding, is one of the most powerful weapons in the world.

We are privileged bearers of Good News. Tell it out, even on a desert road, when the opportunity presents itself.

**RESPOND**

Glenkirk will grow in its witness when members capture the urgency of sharing the best news available to empty, hurting, seeking people. There are strong patterns, like Philip’s, that help us become bold in our witness. The Spirit will guide and empower us, if we respond with “Here am I, send me.”

**PRAY**

God of grace, God of power, energize me to tell Your story with loving persuasion and clear understanding. “God, come back! Smile your blessing smile: That will be our salvation” (Psalm 80 – TM).

- Dave Edwards