

# OPENING THE FLOODGATES

We hope this series of studies will issue in the floodgates of heaven being opened afresh! You'll find the background to the series [here](#).

Don't feel a pressure to answer every question in your Community Group!

There are deliberately 7 (sets of) questions simply to provide a set of daily study notes for those who find it helpful to work their way through the passage like that.

Almost certainly there's too much material for the time available when you meet: use what you find most helpful. Key questions for us all to be looking at this week are questions 3 and 4.

## **4.** *"..encouraged by the Holy Spirit, (the church) grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord .."* (Acts 7.51-9.31)

The passage is 'book-ended' by mirror-image moments. It starts with Stephen preaching in Jerusalem – and his hearers there intent on getting rid of him: and it ends with Saul doing just the same – and facing just the same hostility.

The parallel is deliberate, of course, and serves itself to bring to our attention what the gospel these men preached was all about: the Christ-like, costly death which Stephen died resulted in new life – a wonderful expansion of the gospel work (Acts 8), and in the marvelous conversion of a hardened, hostile sinner (Acts 9). The cross and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

**1. Read the whole passage.** This will give you a feel for the flow of events as the Lord drives His purpose forward.

What excites you most as you read your way through this narrative?

**2. Read 7.55-8.3.** Your able young preacher is stoned to his death, and the church is then scattered by a persecuting mob. Hardly the turn of events you'd have prayed for and sought!

What was there in Stephen's final testimony as he died which occasioned such a violent response from Saul?

Why do you think the apostles alone were not scattered?

**3. Read 8.4-25.** The flame is spreading, for the gospel can't be stamped out. Murder the man with the message: root out the church with their Jesus. Well, they thought they'd 'cleansed' Jerusalem, but the wildfire simply spread out wider. The murdered man's place is soon filled by some others, and the message itself gets some wheels!

As we're '*scattered*' from our weekly Sunday worship, what would it look like if each of us simply "*preached the word wherever (we) went*"?

If we struggle with this, and feel a certain awkwardness in living in that way, why is that? What will help us learn to share the gospel more and more?

From what you read in **vv.5, 12 & 15-23**, what were core features of the message preached by Philip, Peter and John?

**4. Read 8.26-40.** Samaria is way to the north of Jerusalem: and Ethiopia, of course, is a long way south! The reach of the gospel is growing. Over against the impact of the gospel on crowds of folk at a time (which the preceding chapters have shown), here in this next narrative we see how God's Word does its work in the hearts and lives of individual people.

This was clearly a hugely significant encounter. What factors ensured that Philip's engaging with this man would prove so fruitful?

Read **Isaiah 56.3-8**. It's likely that the man had been moved by these verses and was reading up the background to them. Why is it important to begin (as Philip does) where the folk we're with are at? And how do we go about that?

What lessons can you learn from this passage for the encounters you'll have with others through the course of the coming days?

**5. Read 9.1-9.** It wasn't simply to the north and south that the gospel was spreading: it was into the Gentile world as well: the

conversion of the Ethiopian is the prelude to the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, the man who more than any would take the message to 'the Gentiles'.

From the heightened drama of Saul's conversion recounted here, what are the primary features of a true conversion experience?

Why in the will of God do you think Saul is left blinded for three days (v.9)?

**6. Read 9.10-19.** The reluctance of Ananias to go and lay hands on Saul is more than understandable!

Compare **8.29** with **9.11**. We'd want to be this "Go to .." sort of person ourselves: how do we learn that sensitivity to the promptings and the leadings of the Lord?

Look closely at **vv.17-18**: how does Saul experience the *grace* of God through the ministry of Ananias? How can we too in our day by day living minister God's grace to others?

**7. Read 9.20-31.** They'd hoped to get rid of Jesus when they put Him on the cross: and He came back from the dead. And they'd hoped to get rid of His message when they'd stoned and killed the upstart preacher, Stephen: and here a still more potent preacher rises up to take his place. How frustrating it must be to be pitting yourself against Jesus!

What was the substance of the message Saul preached (see **vv.20, 22, 27-28**)?

The church grew in numbers (**9.31**). What do the two 'explanatory' phrases which surround that statement – "*encouraged by the Holy Spirit*" and "*living in the fear of the Lord*" – entail for ourselves?