

Summary for Session 22: The Church Part 2

Prep work: Acts of the Apostles 8-15

DVD: This session opens with a quick recap of the previous session, bringing us up to the spread of the Gospel in Judea and Samaria. Jeff notes that just as the disciples scattered, left their comfort zone of Jerusalem, and witness to strange people in uncomfortable situations, we are also called to do the same. The disciples would witness to the Samaritans, a people actively snubbed by “devout” Jews. They would sit down with Gentiles, an act that Jews considered “unclean.” These situations would have originally been unthinkable for these faithful Jews, but by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the example of Jesus, they realized that these were the people they were called to witness to. Jeff observes that the early Church followed a typical pattern of growth: the disciples would go out, grow communities of believers, and the Apostles would come and bless those communities, laying hands on them and calling down the Spirit to fill their hearts. We see a similar pattern today with the role of our bishops.

Jeff then focuses on Philip's ministry in Samaria. Once he grows a community there, Peter and John come and pray for the Holy Spirit to bless them, which happens in wonderful manifestations. There is a man there, Simon, a magician, who has since converted to Christianity, but sees these works and wants this power for himself. He offers the Apostles money for this power, and Peter admonishes him for his selfishness, calling him to repent. Jeff notes that Peter encouraged the spirituality of Simon, but did not hide the Truth of the matter—a good practice for us when we encounter people in sin. Philip then encounters a eunuch from Ethiopia on the road who is reading the Scriptures. Philip responds to the voice of God and goes up to the eunuch, asking him if he understands what he is reading. Philip goes on to explain the passage and the rest of the Old Testament in light of Jesus, and baptizes the man when he asks for it. Jeff makes three notes about this episode: 1) Philip hears and responds to God's call. We think we can't hear God, that He wouldn't talk to us, but He is always speaking to us in the quiet of our heart and in our thoughts. We need to be open to His voice and willing to respond to His command. 2) The passage the eunuch was reading was around Isaiah 53, regarding the suffering servant, who we relate to Jesus. Just past that, in Isaiah 56, the prophet speaks of eunuchs and foreigners specifically, saying that if they keep God's commandments, they will be acceptable to God, finding joy in God's presence and an eternal name (a problem for eunuchs who could not perpetuate their name through children). 3) “Do you understand what you are reading?” (Acts 8:30) We must learn how to read and understand the Bible and Jesus' message, as Philip did. Who is the teaching authority on this? The Catechism makes it clear that the Magisterium, “the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter” have alone been entrusted with this authority (CCC 85). Jeff closes his remarks by observing that God will send Ethiopians into our lives. More than just reading and understanding the Scriptures, we will be called to teach these truths to others!

Jeff moves on to Saul and his conversion. Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee and a zealot, highly educated in the Scriptures and the Law. He was a student of the great scholar Gamaliel, and a Roman citizen from Tarsus. Jeff relates a 1st

Century belief among the Jews that if the entire world observed the Sabbath at one time, the Messiah would come. Christians were a definite obstacle to this goal, so Saul was determined to stop them, persecuting many. On his way to Damascus to find and imprison more Christians, Saul is stopped on the road and hears a voice identifying itself as Jesus, whom Saul is persecuting. Saul is blinded and told to go on to Damascus and wait for instruction. Saul fasts for the next three days and nights (a sign of humbling oneself and relying on God). Meanwhile, God speaks to Ananias, telling him to go to Saul and heal him. Ananias knows about Saul and his persecutions, but he heeds God and goes and prays over Saul, restoring Saul's sight. Jeff notes that this is another example of the small (Ananias is an obscure person) leading the powerful (Saul has the authority to prosecute); of the weak seeing with clarity while the strong are blind. Now able to see that Jesus fulfilled the Law, Saul converts to Christianity (and later is called Paul) and is quickly filled with zeal for spreading the Gospel. Jeff observes that we should not be surprised by this extreme change; Paul already knew the Scriptures thoroughly, and once he saw Jesus as the fulfillment of the Covenant, everything fit into place and the Scriptures were a complete picture. Jeff shares that his own conversion followed a similar pattern—Catholicism fit the Bible perfectly. Paul will go on to preach to many people and will himself be persecuted. Jeff reminds us that Paul must've remembered during his own persecution the witness and martyrdom of Stephen, which he was present for. Stephen's martyrdom was extremely moving and would have left no small impression on Paul—another example of how our witness may affect people even when we've no idea of it.

Jeff moves on to the spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles. Cornelius, a “God-fearer,” is a centurion in Caesarea (a God-fearer was a believer in God, but not a practicing Jew). Cornelius has a vision at about 3pm, the time of the evening sacrifice (and traditionally, of Jesus' death). An angel tell Cornelius his prayers have been heard by God and that Cornelius should send for Peter. Peter, at the time, is staying with a tanner in Joppa (notable because tanners were considered “unclean” in Judaism). Peter also experiences a vision, but of a spread of all kinds of animals and a voice that tells him to eat. When Peter answers that he will not eat anything unclean (many animals, including pigs, were considered “unclean” in Judaism), he is told that he is not to call anything God makes “unclean.” Jeff pauses to note as an aside that the concept of “clean” and “unclean” has changed in Jesus. In His new Law of Love, sin is what is “unclean,” not people or beings. Peter is confused by the vision until he is called to Cornelius' house, sees his faith, and understands that “in every nation, whoever fears [God] and acts uprightly is acceptable to him” (Acts 10: 35). This is further validated by the fact that the Holy Spirit comes upon the household, and those circumcised and uncircumcised alike speak in tongues and manifest the Spirit. Peter has Cornelius and his household baptized, then goes to Jerusalem and explains all that has happened to the other Apostles. Jeff closes this section by noting that a community of believers also forms in Antioch, where the term Christians is first used to describe these followers of Jesus. The Gospel message spreads, and now it is Herod Agrippa, king of Judea, who persecutes the Christians. He has Peter arrested at Passover, and in a recapitulation of

the Exodus, Peter is miraculously freed by an angel and makes his way safely back to his friends.

Paul's missionary journeys at this time will be covered in the next session, and Jeff ends this session with a review of the first Council of Jerusalem and of Councils in general. The first Council was called to answer the question of whether Gentiles had to become circumcised (that is, become Jewish) before being baptized into the Christian faith. There is a contingency of believers who insist Gentiles must first adhere to Jewish Law, but Paul and others argue that they do not need to. Peter stands and testifies that he does not believe Gentiles must be Jews before becoming Christians. At his word, "the whole assembly fell silent," and they accepted his decision as head of the Church (Acts 15:12). James then bolsters the decision with Scriptural references (setting a precedent followed even today). The apostles put the decision into the form of a letter and send it out to the communities, acknowledging in it their reliance on the guidance of the Holy Spirit and spelling out the duties of the Christian: "abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meats of strangled animals, and from unlawful marriage" (Acts 15:29). Jeff remarks that there were probably many in the community who did not like Peter's decision, but that they all adhered to it, just as we are called to do today. We do not break from the Church whenever we see a need for reform, that is the job of a Council, and we trust the process and the guidance of the Spirit in that process. Jeff then provides a brief mention of several Councils in the history of the Church, emphasizing the most recent Council, Vatican Council II, and its document on the Church in the Modern World. This document was later carried forward by Pope John Paul II in his call for the New Evangelization. As a parting thought, Jeff reminds us again of the role of the pope as the *Al Ha-Bayit* or prime minister of God's kingdom here on earth, meant to be a "father" and a "peg in a sure place" upon which the whole tent depends (Isaiah 22:21, 23). We can rest secure in the authority of the papacy and its place as the rock upon which Jesus builds his church (Matthew 16:18).