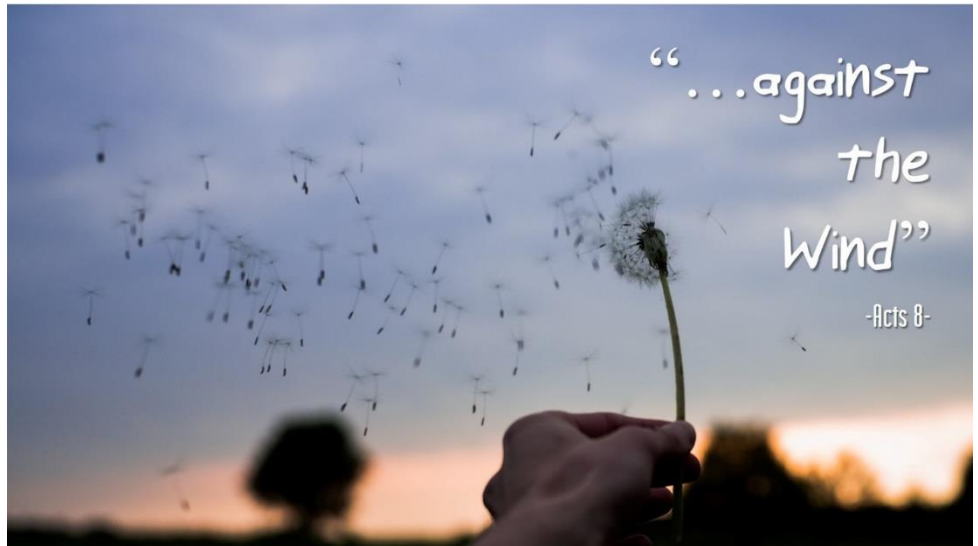


“Against the Wind”

- Acts 8 -

by Pastor Tim Dodson
at JF Believers Church
in Menomonie, Wis
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1 Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. 3 As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. 4 Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. 5 Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. 6 And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. 7 For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. 8 And there was great joy in that city. 9 But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, 10 to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the great power of God." 11 And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time. 12 But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. 13 Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done. 14 Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, 15 who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. 16 For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. 18 And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, 19 saying, "Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit." 20 But Peter said to him, "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! 21 "You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. 22 "Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. 23 "For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity." 24 Then Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me." 25 So when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans. 26 Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is desert. 27 So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, 28 was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go near and overtake this chariot." 30 So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 The place in the Scripture which he read was this: "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth. 33 In His humiliation His justice was taken away, And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth." 34 So the eunuch answered Philip and said, "I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?" 35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him. 36 Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?" 37 Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." 38 So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. 39 Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing. 40 But Philip was found at Azotus. And passing through, he preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea.



Down from the mountain top experiences, the church now enters into the long age of persecution. Certainly there have been passing moments of respite through the centuries, but overall the persecution of the church has extended for 2,000 years, and has and will indeed only increase until Jesus returns for His church.

At the end of Chapter 7 we saw the entrance of a new player on the field: one “Saul of Tarsus,” who begins his public life herein not as the great evangelist that we all know, but instead, as the chief persecutor of the believers. Yet as we have already seen, God is not deterred by the futile efforts of men or the wiles of Satan. For even in this matter... what was essentially to be the “ethnic cleansing” of the followers of Christ, ultimately it served to fulfill the last directive of Christ: to "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations..."

Ironically, persecution of the church of God has never had a lasting and pronounced effect upon its existence or its expansion. Throughout the world and all of time, Christianity has continued to thrive in the harshest of environments. From behind what was once the “Iron Curtain,” to the “upper rooms” of the cities of communist China, to radical Hindu India.

Paul, *Saul of Tarsus*, began his run from God with everything he had. The words “he made havoc” speaks of the ravaging’s of a wild boar. We must note that his support at that time came not from the world at large but rather from the very religious power brokers of his day. Indeed Saul was on a mission, but God was not in it. There was a *religious* zeal but one that held no righteousness and no blessing. Truth be told, the worst persecution that is meted out often comes from within the halls of religious institutions. Jesus Himself warned of such in John 16:2 saying “*the time is coming when those who kill you will think they are doing a holy service for God.*” How right we can think we are, while being so very, very wrong. Despite his fervor, I have no doubt that Saul continued to hear the echo of Stephen’s witness in his head. The louder it got, the harder he ran, and the more he spewed the lies of Satan.

But the true and living Word was out there despite the attacks. And moreover, now such was not only preached by the apostles, but by *all* the followers of Christ. Verse 4 says that due to the difficulty “those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.” Like Joseph with his brethren, “*You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good.*” All of it manifesting the truth of Romans 8:28 “*...we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.*” Such life events may not be pleasant and they may shake the very foundations of our lives, but God had not lost control nor is he panicked. Deut 31:8 reminds us ... “*Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD will personally go ahead of you. He will be with you; he will neither fail you nor abandon you.*”

Philip was one of those guys out on the street, and he took the directives as well as the promises of God seriously. He moved to take the gospel to a people whom no one wanted. He went down to the city of Samaria and began to preach Jesus. We must understand that Samaritans were at that time considered half-breed “dogs,” and were despised by the average Jew. They carried a political history that the Jews would rather forget: memories of Assyrian bondage, displacement, and the intermarrying of Jews with non-Jews. Since that time, Israel has tried at every turn to wash their hands of the Samaritans. People would literally walk the long way around the Samaritan region of the country when traveling beyond their land. Well, *not Jesus*, but the average individual! (Note John 4)

And not Philip either it appears! He literally sought them out with purpose of bringing them the good news, because Jesus always wanted those that no one else wanted. What was happening went down “out there”... beyond church, beyond the righteous halls of the temple in Jerusalem, beyond the pious religiosity of those who believed themselves God’s “chosen.” So it is so often the case yet today.

God was with Philip and his endeavors. The power of God was manifested at his hands, and despite the initial persecution back in Jerusalem, here in Samaria “*...there was great joy...*” But with every move of God, Satan will inevitably move to counter. We know that history is full of individuals who were able to do seemingly miraculous works of healing and acts of the supernatural. Many have personally claimed or been credited with the “power of God.” This biblical character Simon was one such character. We must remember that Satan is a sly foe, one who is recorded as having masqueraded as an “*angel of light.*” Do we think that he is not capable and willing to do some perceived “good works” in order to ultimately deceive the masses? 1 John 4:1 warns us “*Dear friends, do not believe everyone who claims to speak by the Spirit. You must test them to see if the spirit they have comes from God. For there are many false prophets in the world.*”

How does such a ruse happen? Because people are so often looking for what astonishes them more than they are actually looking for the truth. It’s a failing that has plagued humanity from its beginning. Back in the early decades of 2000, there was a man in Brazil who went by the name of “John of God.” He drew people from all

over the world to his small city two hours west of capital, Brasilia, with promises he could treat everything from depression to cancer, and attended to as many as 10,000 patients per week. People from all over the world flocked to his “church,” and he gained international fame, even from Oprah. Yet, in the end a very different picture emerged. Hundreds of women, including his daughter, came forth alleging he regularly engaged in sexual abuse ranging from pedophilia to rape. Now he has been sentenced to prison for decades.

The truth concerning Simon was revealed this time also...in all of its glory. Time will eventually present the truth of an individual. And though the passage says that “Simon also believed and was baptized,” we all realize, *sadly*, that that is not the end of the story. It’s not the end of *anyone’s* story.

Again, the text tells us that “Simon believed and was baptized.” Is that enough? After all, scripture tells us in many places that if we believe we shall be saved. However, the debate is not if this is fact, but rather what it means to “believe.” Belief is only as good as that which our belief is placed upon. The phrase is “believe on” not “believe in.” James 2:19 tells us, “*You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!*” Since I don’t expect to bump into any demons on the streets of eternity, there must be more to it than a simple mental assent!

The question is whether one believes *in* or believes *on*. To believe “in” is to acknowledge His reality and presence, and perhaps even His deity and power. To believe *on* is to actually place one’s faith, trust, and even one’s life in the hands of the object of that belief. Did Simon believe in, or believe on? Such is manifested in what will be found if our faith is tested. Scripture is full of calls to test ourselves and requests for God to test us.

Ps 17:3 *You have tested my heart; You have visited me in the night; You have tried me and have found nothing; I have purposed that my mouth shall not transgress.*

Ps 26:2 *Examine me, O LORD, and prove me; Try my mind and my heart.*

1Co 11:28 *But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.*

1Co 11:31 *For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged.*

Ga 6:4 *But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another.*

2 Cor 13:5 *Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? —unless indeed you are disqualified.*

When the apostles back in Jerusalem heard that God had been “unleashed” down in Samaria, they do what we all do: they jump on board. They “road trip” down to check it out. And what they do when they arrive is critical to our understanding of the separation between the “in” and the “on” camps.

Peter and John brought with them the understanding of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Apparently, many of these new believers had been filled with the Holy Spirit, pushing them from believing in, to believing on. But Simon was not as interested in gaining a Lord over his life as he was gaining power and position.

It’s an age old story! One that is repeated daily in the lives of so very many religious people world-wide. In the final judgement it will ultimately separate the sheep from the goats. The presence of the Holy Spirit is manifested in a person’s life through the exercise of humility, submission to authority, unity, other-centered body life, etc. When it’s about YOU, it’s not about the Spirit!

Simon’s heart, as it generally happens, was publically exposed. He was simply interested in what he could **get** from his new understanding of Jesus, not what he could **give**. He believed **in** Him, but not **on** him. Thus Simon was resoundingly rebuked by the apostles. They recognized the truth and dealt with it. Such a stance in the body cannot be ignored, no matter how difficult and uncomfortable the process might be.

Simon did some quick backpedaling when caught red-handed. In reality, the apostles did him a favor. Maybe he came around and made Jesus Lord in his life. Who knows! One thing was for sure: he didn't want anything bad to happen to him. Perhaps he would be nothing more than one of millions who, not wanting to spend eternity in hell, believe in Jesus Christ, but never know what it means to believe on Jesus Christ. If so, then he will join the crowd in hell, millions of whom spent a lifetime acknowledging that Jesus was the Son of God, maybe even the Savior, but never acknowledging Him as being their Lord.

Verse 26 begins with an account of an "evangelistic outreach," one which begs the question: To what lengths will God go to reach a single soul? How important is one individual to the Father? Herein we have no stadiums, no teams of trained ministry professionals here, not even a church in sight! Just one man with one man.

There is no sign that Philip went out well loaded that day, but he did have his "spiritual ears" open. Because he was ready to hear from the Lord, the Lord spoke to him. Through an angel, God directed him on a journey that would have seemed rather ridiculous to most people. That day, God directed Philip out into the desert.

Spiritually speaking, many of us can relate to such a journey. Today, one does not have to feel the sand between his toes to experience the desert. Certainly when we find ourselves there, even understanding that God called us there or placed us there, it is often hard to accept and even harder to understand why. But Philip was an individual of rare breed. He understood the reality that God was firmly and magnificently in control of the whole stage. The Word has no record of any argument on behalf of Philip, just simply "he arose and went."

One would certainly tend to think that Philip might object to leaving a new and thriving ministry in Samaria. It would be natural to doubt that God would call him to leave this blossoming work of new converts and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to go to, of all places, *the desert*. After all, who could be out there in the desert? Samaria is where it's happening!

There were two roads that led to Gaza, and God instructed Philip to take the "one less traveled." Because he did, and he was obedient to God, the gospel was now going to make the mammoth leap from Samaria all the way to Africa. Philip's faith was translated in more than mere words. His faith knew action.

This "man from Ethiopia" was clearly a wealthy and influential man. Such worldly status has repeatedly failed to bring the clarity of purpose and the "fullness of being" that mankind erroneously believes will occur. Despite having the world by the tail, he was still seeking answers. He was looking hard, for his travels would encompass a trip of 750 miles one way, and probably a quarter of a year.

At the beginning of verse 29 we read "*Then the Spirit said...*" It was clear that Philip was perceptive to the leading of the Spirit. Yet we need to understand that such a gift isn't necessarily unique or rare. The Spirit of God is readily available to empower and direct any believer who is willing to surrender themselves to God for such a use. Philip was led by the Spirit to approach this Ethiopian and assist him in his quest. Note that the Spirit *led* him! We are often apt to move toward such a ministry under our own power and timing, instead of waiting for the Spirit's leading and timing.

When Philip finds this man, he must have quickly realized that God had already beat him to the punch! God had already prepared the Ethiopians heart to receive his words and simply prepared Philip to be the "delivery boy!"

This man had come recently from Jerusalem and had apparently spent an indeterminate period of time awash in religion, but he had still failed to find the beautiful simple truth of the Savior who died for him! Such a state is not unusual, even in today's plethora of church denominations. Yet now he stood at the precipice of discovery! His hungry heart would not be ignored. For on this day, the God he was seeking would lead him both to Isaiah 53, and to a stranger in the desert who would point the way "home."

On that day, this Ethiopian had stumbled upon a profound prophecy of "biblical" proportions. A section of scripture that was fulfilled in awesome detail in a "God-man" by the name of Jesus Christ. In Isaiah 53 there

exists a “snapshot” of the “Suffering Servant,” one whom this man had never met, but whom Philip knew personally and intimately. Philip knew not only of the prophecy but its fulfillment too. He knew of the humiliation of Jesus Christ, and how He voluntarily went to that cross as a “sheep to slaughter.” Philip knew how Jesus refused to defend Himself at his trial, and just why He did it. The Ethiopian asked Philip just who this passage was referring to, and Philip unleashed the symphony of good news there in the desert...

Philip “preached Jesus to him.” Not religion, church, or denomination, only Jesus crucified and resurrected. We often feel strangely compelled to argue evolution, morality, biblical nuances, or other issues, that have no eternal effect upon a person’s decision for or against the offer of redemption. The issue was Christ and salvation, and whether God has paved the way for that meeting. Because let’s face it. If God has not been there before us, we are wasting our breath, and often even “casting pearls before swine.” (Matt 7:6) John 6:44 reminds us that “...*people can’t come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them to me...*”

With the truth on the table, this man had made his decision, and was ready to step up and bear witness of his newfound faith. After all, what IS the criteria for baptism but “*the possession of a saving faith and a new birth.*”

Note that verse 37 is a controversial passage because it fails to appear in some Greek manuscripts. Whether it does or not, it doesn’t change its truth. For that truth...that criteria for salvation and baptism, is found throughout the pages of Scripture. What is important here is that this man believed *on*. Not merely “in” but was ready to believe “on.” It was the action behind his words that bore witness that this man found more than just Philip there in the desert that day. He found his Savior. He found Jesus.

This man had met God, and he surrendered himself. He surrendered his life. Extra-biblical history records that He returned to Ethiopia and brought a Jesus revival to the country of Ethiopia.

Suddenly, as mysteriously as he appeared, Philip was gone. The word used here is “snatched away,” and is the same word where we get “rapture” in relation to the exit of the believing church. Maybe God chose this method just to simply show mankind that He could, but whatever the reason, Philip was suddenly in Azotus. The Ethiopian went on his way rejoicing. Why not? He had found what he was looking for...