

Sunday School Lesson

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er of suffering. Stephen laid down his life; but watching the stoning was the young man Paul. (Acts 8:1) Paul bitterly opposed the Christians' claim that Jesus was the Messiah, and he began to work earnestly to wipe out the new faith. But the memory of Stephen's prayer of forgiveness and of the radiance on his face stayed with him until he himself met the Christ.

We naturally shrink from pain and danger. We want to stay out

of trouble. But history teaches us that the persons who suffer in behalf of a right cause are the ones who help shape the future.

The Gospel Crosses a Barrier

The second incident in our Scripture material has to do with the work of Philip. (Acts 8:4-40) As we have seen, the unexpected result of persecution was the spread of the gospel. We are told that the Christians were "scattered" like seed into the surrounding areas of Judea and Samaria. Wherever they went, they preached. They turned adversity into new oppor-

tunity.

Every reader of the New Testament knows that the "Jews have no dealings with Samaritans." (John 4:9) The hostility had its roots in the eighth century B.C., when the northern tribes were defeated by Assyria. The conquerors took many of the people and resettled them elsewhere, replacing them with people from other conquered countries. The children of the Israelites still living in the area married some of the newcomers. The Samaritans of the New Testament were their descend-

The Samaritans not only had some Jewish blood, but they also worshiped the God of Israel and shared the Jewish hope for a Messiah. However, they believed that Mount Gerizim, not Jerusalem, was the place where God wanted his Temple. (John 4:20) Because of their mixed blood and their unorthodox ideas, the Jews regarded the Samaritans with contempt.

With this background we can recognize how amazing it was that Philip would preach to the Samaritans. This action began the process of moving the church beyond the limitations of a sect

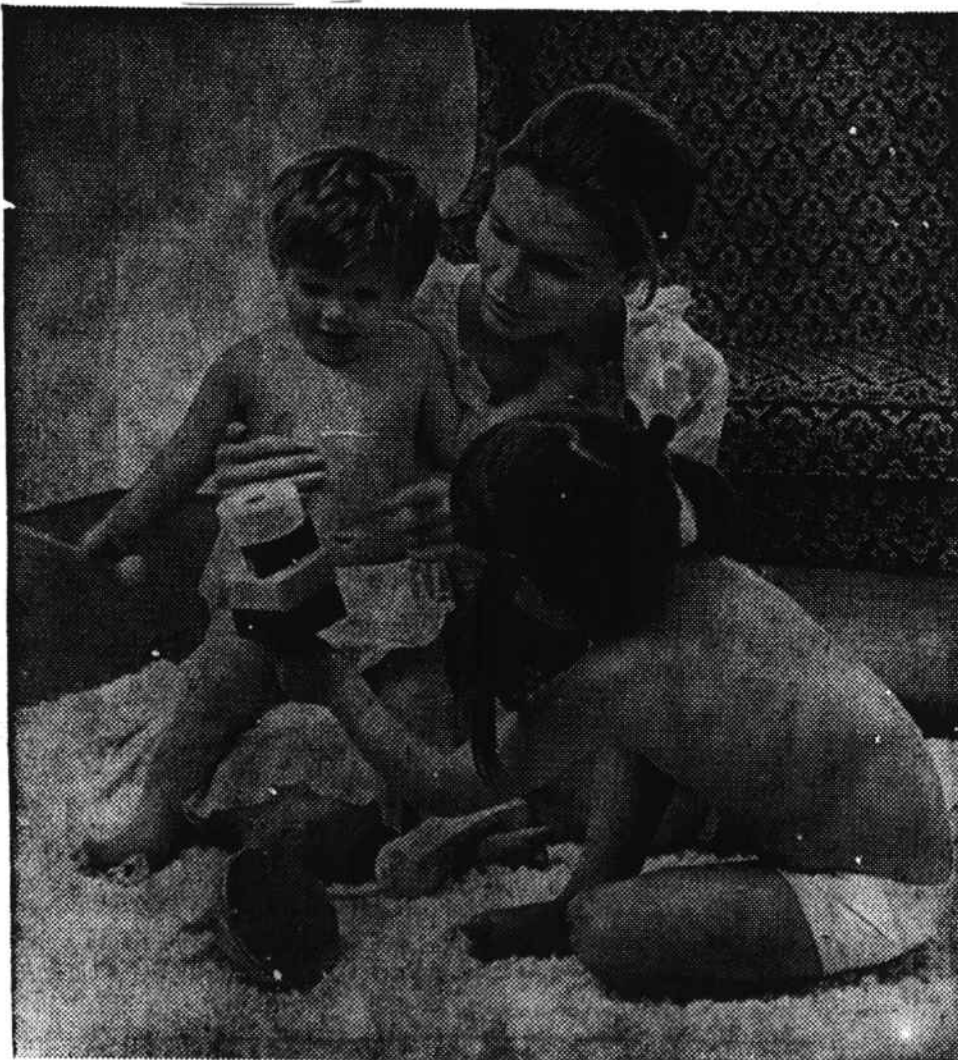
within Judaism.

We learn a number of lessons from this chapter. One is that the gospel is able to overcome centuries of animosity. Ordinarily these fugitives from Jerusalem would have been refused shelter. However, Philip and his companions were received and found listeners and converts. When leaders of the Jerusalem church came to Samaria, they too were received. They were so impressed by what they saw that on their way home they preached in other Samaritan villages. Thus the gospel early

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