

# Acts 8 (Part 1): 1-25 • Persecution and Growth

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Make sure that you are in Acts chapter 8, that's where we're going to be picking up the text. Let's pray.

Jesus, as we just take a minute to dig into Your Word here this morning, we pray for Your Holy Spirit to open our hearts, our eyes, our ears.

Lord, we want to learn, we want to grow, we want to understand, and we want to be equipped. We pray that You do that.

Use the Word to challenge and encourage us. Lord, we even invite You to bring correction if it's needed today. We look to You.

We thank You, Father, in Jesus precious name, amen.

You guys will remember last week we talked about how a man by the name of Stephen began to draw the attention of some of the Jews in Jerusalem to the point that they debated with him about his Christian teachings, his understanding of Scripture related to the Messiah. And when they couldn't stand against the wisdom by which he spoke, they decided to make trouble for him and they stirred up individuals to claim that Stephen had blasphemed God, blasphemed the law, the temple, and so on, and so on.

Eventually they hauled Stephen before the Jewish ruling council; the Sanhedrin, and they told him that he needed to give an account of himself. Well, that caused Stephen to launch into a fairly lengthy speech, during which he essentially accused the Jews of having a long standing relationship with rebellion, essentially, and hard heartedness.

And then he ended his speech by telling them that they never really had ever kept the law, and that they were guilty of murdering the anointed One whom God had sent. Well, that sent them into a rage. It became mob violence, and they grabbed Stephen, pulled him outside the city gates, and they began to throw rocks at him until he was dead. And there you have it, the first Christian martyr.

Well, that is essentially where we pick up the text. In fact, verse 1 is really one that, the first part of verse 1 should have been really with the previous chapter, because the first part of verse 1 says, *“And Saul approved of his execution.”* (ESV)

Remember that Saul is the man who will later become the apostle Paul. He's referred to as Saul here because that's his Hebrew name. But then he will be called Paul later because that is the Greek form of his name. And the reason they begin to call him by the Greek form of his name later is because he was an apostle called to reach the Gentiles.

We go on here in verse 1, and it says, *“And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.”* They stayed put.

Verse 2 says that, *“Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.”* In other words they mourned his passing.

But it says in verse 3, *“But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.”*

Finally, verse 4 says, *“Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.”*

Now I want to stop there for just a moment because what Luke is doing in his masterful writing style, is that before he launches into the main topic that he really wants to address in the first part of chapter 8, is he gives us these quick snapshots of what the environment of the early church was like at that time. In other words, here's what's going on.

And let me bullet point these for you on the screen. This is what he was saying.

#### **Snapshots of the current state of affairs**

- There arose...a great persecution
- The believers were scattered
- Paul was ravaging the church
- Scattered believers were preaching the Word

He was saying that, There arose a great persecution. This is, just things got really hard, very, for people. The believers, as a result, were scattered. Saul

(Paul) was ravaging the church. And then he made the point that the Scattered believers were also preaching the Word.

This is what was going on. And the fact that these believers were being scattered into all parts of Judea and Samaria and were preaching the Word means that people were getting saved because of it.

This is an interesting sort of a situation, almost a blessing in disguise. I mean, it's hard to think about persecution as a blessing in any way, but in the sense that the believers were being scattered and preaching wherever they went, that was pretty cool. In fact, that's what believers do when they move to other places, they take the gospel with them.

There was a story I read years ago about some communist country that was all tied up in knots about these people that were coming to Christ. And of course they didn't like that because communism doesn't go very well with Christianity and vice versa.

So they decided they wanted to do something to try to tamp down these Christians. And so they started asking themselves, well, what do we see them doing? Well, they're always gathering. Just like you guys are doing here today.

They're always coming together and gathering so what we need to do is we need to split them up. So that's what they did. Being a communist country and stuff, they just started deporting people to various places. Some people out into the outermost regions, small little villages, and they just started scattering the people.

Well, guess what the people did? They shared the gospel wherever they went. It turned out it was the first government funded evangelistic effort. And here they thought they were going to break it up and cause these people to dry up and blow away, and that's exactly the opposite of what happened. They shared the gospel wherever they went. And that's what's essentially happening here.

But make no mistake about it, the persecution was the impetus of that scattering. And sometimes we need an impetus in our lives. You hear me? What I'm saying is, sometimes, we can get a little bit lax. Sometimes we need a little kick in our complacency and we need to get moved out beyond where we are.

And sometimes the Lord will use hardship in our lives to do that, but ultimately it brings about the fulfillment of what He commissioned them to do in the first place. Let me put the great commission on the screen for you. It's for Matthew

28:19. Jesus said, *Go therefore and make disciples of* (your neighborhood. Actually, He didn't say that, He said *of all nations, ...* ” You see that there?

### **Matthew 28:19 (ESV)**

*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,*

*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,*

*Go ... and make disciples of all nations.* ” In other words, you're going to have to scatter. You're going to have to move out from your comfort zone. Right?

I know your seats are very comfortable there, but there's a time and a place for moving out and getting uncomfortable. And sometimes if we're not willing, God will bring discomfort into our lives so that we will actually make that move and begin to do what we are called to do. This is what's happening in the early church and in this evangelistic movement that Luke is telling us about, he's going to begin to focus on one particular man who later we find out is, really has an evangelistic calling, and that's this man named Philip.

We'll talk about it because here in verse 5, if you look with me in your Bible, it says, “*Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.*” Alright, where is Samaria in relationship to the land of Judea? Let me put a map up on the screen so you can see it. First of all, let me point to Judea for you. That area that's more the Roman Grecian name for Judah. Okay.



And that area that you see there was what we used to call in the Old Testament, the southern kingdom of Judah. Right? And that's part of Israel, but it was the southern kingdom of Judah.

Then you've got Samaria. We'll point to that for you.



That area that was Samaria during the time of Christ, was the northern kingdom of Israel in the Old Testament times. But you see what happened is, the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered first by the Assyrians because they fell into idolatry and they were deported. Not all of them.

There were some Jews left behind to work the land, but most of the people were deported, and other nations that the Assyrians conquered, they brought to that area that was the northern kingdom of Israel. And those Gentiles began to intermarry with the Jews that had been left behind. And those Gentiles and those Jews became Samaritans. They're half breeds; essentially half Jew, half Gentile. And they were despised by the Jews who lived in the southern kingdom of Judah, which of course by the time of Christ and the Roman occupation was called Judea. All right, so that's the problem then.

Of course, on the map, you have the northern area of Galilee, where many of the Jews were also living at the time of Christ, and that is where Jesus himself was raised. The point that I want to make here, is that what Philip was doing, and what we read there in verse 5, was really a very groundbreaking thing, because, you see, most of the Jews didn't believe that Samaritans could even be saved.



The Jews considered all Gentiles, and they put Samaritans in there because they were half Gentile, they considered them fire, or wood, for the fires of hell. They believed they were reprobate, they had no ability to be saved.

Here's Philip going to Samaria, preaching the gospel, and guess what's happening? People are getting saved, and it's pretty incredible, actually.

Let's keep reading, verse 6. Oh, one more thing. Did you notice that it says in verse 5 that Philip went down to Samaria? You look at the map and you go, Wait a minute, Samaria is north.

Well, the reason they said that is because what Luke is describing is the trip in terms of elevation, not direction. They didn't think in terms of north, south, east, west. They thought in terms of elevation, and it is down from Jerusalem to Samaria. And that's why they say that.

*“<sup>6</sup> And the crowds (it says) with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. <sup>7</sup> For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. <sup>8</sup> So there was much joy in that city.”* So this is cool.

Not only are these people responding to the gospel and getting saved, but God is healing them of their issues and their diseases and their demonic possession.

There's this validation of the message of the gospel that's happening because of these signs and wonders that are occurring. And it's an exciting time in Samaria.

Verse 9 tells us, *“But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic (and that word can also be translated, sorcery) in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great.*

*<sup>10</sup> They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is the power of God that is called Great.” <sup>11</sup> And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic.”* There you go, sorcery.

By the way, this was a common thing in the Roman Empire at this time. People who practiced astrology called themselves prophets. People who were sorcerers just like this man, they would travel throughout the Roman empire and they would prey upon people essentially. The ignorance and superstition of people.

But in some cases there were some genuine supernatural events taking place, probably demonic, but they would do this for money. And this was a fairly common sort of a thing. And this guy appears to have lived in the area of Samaria.

And it says in verse 12 that, *“But when they (and that refers to the people of Samaria) believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.”* It's a simple statement saying that the people of Samaria were getting saved and being baptized.

But I want you to notice verse 13. *“Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. (that means he followed Philip around) And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.”*

Verse 14. *“Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, <sup>15</sup> who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, <sup>16</sup> for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.”* Pause there with me for a moment. What's going on here?

What this means, in verses 15 and 16, is that the believers there in Samaria had not yet received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. They, of course, had received the Holy Spirit to indwell. That's what happens when we come to faith in Jesus Christ. But the Spirit had not yet come upon them.

And you'll remember, we said that there are very important prepositional terms that are used in the Bible to describe the different roles of the Holy Spirit in relationship to the believer. When the word, **in**, is used, it's talking about the Holy Spirit coming in to indwell. That means when a person becomes born again. Right? Or the word that's also used in the Bible is, regeneration. Okay? So the Spirit comes in, that happens at the point of faith. When you put your faith in Jesus, the Spirit comes in to indwell.

But when the Bible uses the preposition, **on**, or **upon**, it's talking about the empowering work of the Holy Spirit that comes through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. And that is what's happening here. These people were saved. They were born again. But the apostles, it tells us here that the Spirit had not yet come upon any of them, and so the apostles laid hands on them. That's what it says in verse 17.

Again, look at verse 17. *“Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.”* Again, that's for the baptism.

And we know that this is not for regeneration because you don't need to have hands laid on you to receive the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Again, that just happens through faith, when you come to faith. But this connection of laying hands is connected to this idea of the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

And the other thing about the baptism is that, when the baptism of the Spirit takes place, there is often an external something that you can recognize because it's all about power. The baptism of the Spirit is about being empowered by the Holy Spirit, and you can usually see that.

You can't see it when somebody gets saved. There's really no manifestation of the spirit. Remember Jesus said the wind blows, wherever it wants and you don't know where it's going or where it's coming from or whatever. (John 3:8) He says, so are those who are born of the Spirit. Remember He said that to Nicodemus? So it's something that, it's just like the wind. The wind comes and you're born again.

And it's just like, wow. And somebody walks into church one day and they're not saved, they hear the message of the gospel, they get saved, they walk out, they look the same and you can't... You don't look at that person and go, wow, they got saved. It's not like they turn a different color.

But when the baptism of the Spirit takes place, there's usually some kind of a manifestation, and often in the new testament, they would speak in tongues, and



there would be other manifestations as well. That's what people saw. And that's what we're going to see here in verse 18.

Look at verse 18 with me. It says, *“Now when Simon saw (and that means with his eyes) that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, (again, he saw a manifestation that was connected to the baptism of the Spirit, it says) he offered them money, <sup>19</sup> saying, “Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”*

*<sup>20</sup> But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! <sup>21</sup> You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. <sup>22</sup> Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. <sup>23</sup> For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.””*

By the way, that is a supernatural gifting that Peter is exercising right there at that point when he says, *“...I see that you are in the gall of bitterness.”* And what that means is, that's a word of knowledge.

And Paul talks about this in 1 Corinthians chapter 12, is one of the gifts of the Spirit. A word of knowledge is the ability to see into the life of an individual, something that you wouldn't be able to see with human eyes. But through a supernatural ability, God enables someone so gifted to see that someone is struggling or dealing with something that is under the surface, if you will.

And apparently, this Simon guy had gone through some traumatic experience in his life, for which he became bitter. And he refused to let go of that bitterness, and he became captive to it. And that's what Peter is seeing in this man. I see that you are captive to this bitterness. You're captive to this sin and so forth. So this is the recognition of something supernaturally by the Spirit.

Now look at Simon's response in verse 24. *“And Simon answered, “Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.””* So he's concerned.

Verse 25. *“Now when they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, (referring to Peter and John) preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.”*

So there's this huge evangelistic movement now that is moving into Samaria. People are getting saved, it's exciting. There's supernatural things happening, and it's all very cool.

But we need to deal with this Simon guy. By the way, Simon was an incredibly common name in those days, like Bob or Jim or something like that. And yet this man is one who has captivated the hearts and minds of Bible students for many years.

In fact, I'll tell you that there's a debate that has been raging about this man for many years. And the debate is all about whether or not he was a true believer. Whether or not he was genuine in his conversion to Christ. Whether or not he really truly gave his heart to the Lord.

And there are people who believe very strongly that he did not make a genuine profession of faith. And there are others who believe that he very well did become a born again believer. And each of them, they've got their reasons. Let me just share with you on the screen some of these.

We'll start with the reasons that people doubt that Simon was genuine in his conversion to Christ, his coming to Christ. And really these center around the statements of Peter.

#### **Reasons to doubt Simon was genuine in his faith**

- Peter said, “You have neither part nor lot in this matter”

The first being, “*You have neither part nor lot in this matter.*” And that phrase, “*in this matter.*” Many people take that to mean, all of Christianity. They basically say, you have no part in Christianity. You have no part in this faith that is ours in Jesus. And they say, because of that statement we believe very strongly that Peter is saying that he did not make a true and genuine conversion to Christ.

#### **Reasons to doubt Simon was genuine in his faith**

- Peter said, “You have neither part nor lot in this matter”
- Peter said, “May your silver perish with you”

And then also Peter made the statement to him that, he said, “*May your silver perish with you.*”

In other words, what people see in this statement is that they believe that Peter was saying that you're still on the road to perishing, and may your money perish with

you. May it go right along with you, and so forth. And so those are really the main primary reasons. And you might look at those and go, that's a pretty good argument. Pretty convincing. I think I might even side with that position. That yeah, I don't think Simon was a genuine believer.

But you know what? There are a lot of people who believe he was. And let me show you the reasons that they do. Reasons to believe that Simon was genuine in his faith.

**Reasons to believe that Simon was genuine in his faith.**

- Luke writes that Simon “believed”

First of all, Luke writes that Simon “believed,” and that's in verse 13. And you'll notice in verse 12, he says, the Samaritans believed. And he uses the same word in both verses. So if you're going to doubt the conversion, or the validity of the word, believed in verse 13, you pretty much have to doubt it in verse 12 too, because it's the same word. They believed. It means they came to faith. They put their confidence in.

I actually looked up the word, believed, in my Greek dictionary, and it says, it literally means, to put confidence in. Okay? Luke writes, that Simon put his confidence in Christ and his work on the cross.

**Reasons to believe that Simon was genuine in his faith.**

- Luke writes that Simon “believed”
- Philip baptized Simon

The next reason is that, Philip baptized him (Simon). It says it right there in the Word that Simon was baptized. And Philip obviously believed enough about Simon's profession of faith, that he went ahead and baptized him in water.

But some people look at these first 2 reasons and they go, yeah, but look what he said. Look what he did. He saw that the Holy Spirit was coming upon people at the laying on of the hands of the apostles and he offered them money. That's ungodly. And I'm like, yeah, it is. But there's another bullet point I want to put up here.

**Reasons to believe that Simon was genuine in his faith.**

- Luke writes that Simon “believed”
- Philip baptized Simon
- Unsanctified thoughts are not uncommon among new believers

These sorts of Unsanctified thoughts are not uncommon among new believers.

When you come to faith in Jesus Christ, you become a new creation in the spiritual sense of the word, but it's not like the old man just goes away. I mean, the old stinking thinking sticks around for a long time. And this sort of dumb talk, and even sinful actions can, it's not at all uncommon in a new believer.

**Reasons to believe that Simon was genuine in his faith.**

- Luke writes that Simon “believed”
- Philip baptized Simon
- Unsanctified thoughts are not uncommon among new believers
- When confronted Simon appeared sorrowful and desirous to change

And the other thing that I find very interesting is the fact, and this is the fourth point on the screen, is that, when Simon was confronted by Peter, he appeared very sorrowful and fearful and had a real desire to change.

Okay, so I've given you both sides of the debate. I'm not so arrogant as to think that I can settle your minds on this today. We probably won't. This thing has been raging for a long time.

But what I wanted to do is take you through a little bit of an exercise because I had a point to that exercise, and the point is, you can't always know. You can't always know when you look at somebody and their life, and you can't say for absolute certainty about someone. I'm talking about dealing with somebody else.

You can't always know what is going on in the heart of others. Sometimes you just have to take them by their word. When people come to me and we're going to have a baptism class here soon, and I'm going to do that thing on the Friday before the baptism, and I'm going to ask the people.

Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? And they're going say, yes, we have. And you've confessed your sin and you know that you're born again, right? Yep. And I'm going to, you know what? I'm going to take their word for it and then we're going to dunk them. And that's just, that's what we're going to do. Because there's a point where you just take people at their word.

Oh, but people don't like taking people at their word. They want to know. People always want to know. They want to know to the point where the majority of the questions that I field from Christians are all about wanting to

solve this very issue. Not necessarily about Simon, this guy in Samaria, but about other people.

And I get questions from people about other people all the time. And these questions come in all kinds of shapes and sizes and flavors. They'll say, if a person is doing such and such, can they really be saved? Or they'll say, if somebody struggles with this area of sin, is it possible that they could truly be born again?

Or, pastor Paul, can a Catholic be saved? I mean, can they really, truly be saved? What about somebody who prays to receive Christ, but they never go to church and they rarely ever read their Bible? Doesn't that show that they probably weren't really saved? These are the questions I get all the time. All the time.

And I always feel the need, not to necessarily answer the question, which probably frustrates people, but rather to bring them back to the basic understanding of how a person is saved. And that's what I always try to do. And I try to remind them, salvation is not about the church you attend.

When you stand before God, He's not going to say, now, where did you go to church? I got news for you. That's not going to be on the test. He didn't care. It's not about whether you struggle with sin. We all struggle with sin. All of us. All of us without exception. That has nothing to do with your salvation.

Oh, but people want to make it all about the salvation. Yeah, well, I know this... My Uncle Jerry, he prayed to receive the Lord about 2 months ago, well, let me tell you how Jerry lives. And they want to go into all this detail and they want to doubt, say, don't you think that means pastor Paul, that he probably didn't really come to Christ.

I can't know that and neither can you. Here's what we do know, that when a person puts their confidence in the finished work of Jesus on the cross, they are saved, period. Some people are bothered. I'm sorry, if this is you, I don't mean to. But some people are bothered because they don't know the day for sure when they got saved. Because they'll hear other people say, yeah, it was Thursday, January the 3rd, 1982. I got on my knees and came to Christ, and oh man, I took... And they're like, I don't know when I got saved.

And then they start going, well, maybe I'm not saved. And I've had people write to me, pastor Paul, I don't know when I got saved, does that mean maybe I'm

not saved? I write them back and I go, I don't know when I got saved either. What I ask them is, are you saved today? Yeah? Well, that's all that matters.

But we get all tied in knots over all these different things, or whether you have a powerful testimony. People, sometimes get up in church and they'll tell their testimonies and I love testimonies. They're great, because a lot of people have gone through very traumatic experiences and they've... Drug abuse and this and that, and God just supernaturally and powerfully saved them out of these things and cleaned up their lives and they have a great testimony.

But you know, there are some people who were raised in Christian homes, godly homes, that just kind of drifted into the kingdom. And they never really went through a real rebellious period, and they never took drugs in their life, they've never been drunk, and they don't really have any story to tell. They're like, yeah, I just one day said, thank you, Jesus, and that's their testimony. And they're like, am I really saved? Yeah, of course you are. Don't get weirded out.

It's just, we want to put all these other things as part of the whole issue of salvation. But salvation isn't about you. It's about Him. It's about Jesus and what He did on the cross, and it's about you simply having confidence in what He did. Right?

If you believe what Jesus did on the cross was for you and you've accepted it personally, you're a born again Christian. Get over yourself. Right? Stop thinking about this and that and the other thing. Well, but I don't know my Bible very well. Neither did the thief on the cross. And I dare say he'd never been to church or gotten baptized or went through New Believers class. He was a little tied up at the time, but you know what I mean?

Let me tell you something though. Let me tell you something. Like I said, I'm not exactly sure when I got saved. I embraced the gospel to some degree, at least with an understanding when I was about 15 years old, but I was about 24 or around 25, when I really made the decision to really walk with Jesus. But let me tell you something. The first few years from about 24 to, I don't know, 27, was a train wreck. If I wasn't running from Satan during that time, I was running toward my passions.

And if you would have looked at my life during those first couple of years. You probably would have said, well, I don't know if he made a genuine confession of faith or not. I'm not sure if he's really saved. I bet you would have said that. During that time, I never doubted what Jesus did for me on the cross, but I was still a mess. I was a mess. And I didn't look like a born again Christian. I believe

I was, but I sure didn't look like it. And it took a few years for me to even start looking like someone that another Christian would want to hang around with.

It wasn't pretty, and I know that there's a lot of you that have gone through the same thing. You came to Christ, but it's been a sputtering, kind of an ongoing start and stop process ever since. And you struggled and I just want you to know something, God's not going to give up on you.

I am so thankful He didn't give up on me during those train wreck years. And He brought some people into my life that didn't give up on me either, and I'm thankful for them too. Because I probably gave them every reason to say, you know what, Paul, I think you just need to like, go away.

Instead of wondering whether someone's confession of faith is genuine, I think that we should do what Simon asked Peter to do after he got a strong rebuke from Peter. It's in verse 24 again if you want to look at it. You know what Simon said? He said, "*Pray for me...*" "*Pray for me...*"

Instead of doubting people, I think that's what we should be doing for them. I think we should be praying for them. And I'm so glad I had people praying for me during that time because it didn't look very pretty. I keep coming back to the Gospel of John, Chapter 1. Let me put it on the screen. John writes,

**John 1:12-13 (ESV)**

*...to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*

*...to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, (and you know that when the Bible says believing in someone's name, it refers to believing everything he ever said about himself, to those who believed in his name) he gave the right to become children of God, (and this has nothing to do with physical children. He says here) who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, (no, this has nothing to do with man, they were born) but of God.*

Why? Because they believed and received. They believed and received. Does it mean their lives were perfect? Heavens, no. Does it mean they stopped saying stupid things? No. Does it mean that they didn't fall down repeatedly into areas of sin that had previously captivated their lives? No.

It just means they believed and received and they're children of God.