



The Expansion of the Church through Persecution (Acts 8:1-25)

Notes: Week Fifteen

Acts 8:1-25 (NIV)

8 And Saul approved of their killing him.

The Church Persecuted and Scattered

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ² Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. ³ But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

Philip in Samaria

⁴ Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. ⁵ Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. ⁶ When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. ⁷ For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸ So there was great joy in that city.

Simon the Sorcerer

⁹ Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, ¹⁰ and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, “This man is rightly called the Great Power of God.” ¹¹ They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery. ¹² But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. ¹³ Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

¹⁴ When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. ¹⁵ When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸ When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money ¹⁹ and said, “Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”

²⁰ Peter answered: “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! ²¹ You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. ²² Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. ²³ For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.”

²⁴ Then Simon answered, “Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me.”

²⁵ After they had further proclaimed the word of the Lord and testified about Jesus, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.

Acts 8:1-25 (HCSB)

Saul the Persecutor

8 Saul agreed with putting him to death.

On that day a severe persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the land of Judea and Samaria. ² Devout men buried Stephen and mourned deeply over him. ³ Saul, however, was ravaging the church. He would enter house after house, drag off men and women, and put them in prison.

Philip in Samaria

⁴ So those who were scattered went on their way preaching the message of good news. ⁵ Philip went down to a^[a] city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. ⁶ The crowds paid attention with one mind to what Philip said, as they heard and saw the signs he was performing. ⁷ For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed, and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. ⁸ So there was great joy in that city.

The Response of Simon

⁹ A man named Simon had previously practiced sorcery in that city and astounded the Samaritan people, while claiming to be somebody great. ¹⁰ They all paid attention to him, from the least of them to the greatest, and they said, “This man is called the Great Power of God!”^[b] ¹¹ They were attentive to him because he had astounded them with his sorceries for a long time. ¹² But when they believed Philip, as he preached the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. ¹³ Then even Simon himself believed. And after he was baptized, he went around constantly with^[c] Philip and was astounded as he observed the signs and great miracles that were being performed.

Simon’s Sin

¹⁴ When the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had welcomed God’s message, they sent Peter and John to them. ¹⁵ After they went down there, they prayed for them, so the Samaritans might receive the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶ For He had not yet come down on^[d] any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸ When Simon saw that the Holy^[e] Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹ saying, “Give me this power too, so that anyone I lay hands on may receive the Holy Spirit.”

²⁰ But Peter told him, “May your silver be destroyed with you, because you thought the gift of God could be obtained with money! ²¹ You have no part or share in this matter, because your heart is not right before God. ²² Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³ For I see you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.”

²⁴ “Please pray^[f] to the Lord for me,” Simon replied, “so that nothing you have said may happen to me.”

²⁵ Then, after they had testified and spoken the message of the Lord, they traveled back to Jerusalem, evangelizing many villages of the Samaritans.

Footnotes:

- a. [Acts 8:5](#) Other mss read *the*
- b. [Acts 8:10](#) Or *This is the power of God called Great*
- c. [Acts 8:13](#) Or *he kept close company with*
- d. [Acts 8:16](#) Or *yet fallen on*
- e. [Acts 8:18](#) Other mss omit *Holy*
- f. [Acts 8:24](#) Gk words *you* and *pray* are pl

Holman Christian Standard Bible - *Study Bible*¹

Acts 8:1-25

8:1 Events surrounding Stephen's testimony and murder led to **severe persecution of the church in Jerusalem**. All believers **except the apostles** were **scattered** to nearby regions. Hence the persecution helped spread the gospel to surrounding areas such as **Judea** and **Samaria**. The facts that the apostles were not the focus of the persecution and that it came about after Stephen's death suggest that the persecution focused primarily on Hellenistic Jewish Christians, although the entire church was affected.

8:3 Paul, or **Saul**, seems to have become lead persecutor. His reputation as a destructive force in Jerusalem (**ravaging the church**), and possibly elsewhere, seems to have preceded him to Damascus (**9:13**).

8:5 Among those who scattered with the heightened persecution was **Philip**, who went to a **city in Samaria**. This territory near Judea was made up of those who had not left under the Assyrian exile and had intermarried with non-Jews. Jews generally looked down on Samaria; ministry here was a significant step for the church, for it indicated that old biases had no place in Christianity.

8:6-7 The **signs** that accompanied Philip's message about Jesus, including the casting out of **unclean spirits** and the healing of **many who were paralyzed and lame**, ensured that the audience **paid attention with one mind**. God was vouching for Philip's preaching.

8:9 This Simon the magician (Simon Magus), who **practiced sorcery** in Samaria, was well-known in post-apostolic Christianity as a heretic and proto-Gnostic.

8:10 The term **Great Power of God** reflects pagan language.

8:13 **Even Simon** was one of those who **believed** the good news presented by Philip. The authenticity of his belief is doubtful. He seems to have been fixated on the **signs** and **miracles** that accompanied Philip's preaching, not the person of Jesus Christ.

8:17 Early converts received the Holy Spirit at the laying on of hands by apostles or evangelists. Some suggest that this was God's plan to ensure that new believers received trustworthy instruction and got connected to God's chosen apostolic leaders.

8:18-19 Here we see Simon's true heart. He was used to impressing the crowds with magic; now he wanted to impress them with his ability to impart the **Holy Spirit**.

8:20-22 By saying that Simon had **no part or share in this matter**, Peter confirmed that Simon had not truly converted to Christianity. His **heart** (meaning his will, affections, allegiance) was still **not right before God**.

8:25 After several episodes in Samaria, Peter, Philip, and any other apostles traveling with them returned to **Jerusalem**. They evangelized **many villages of the Samaritans** along the way, tearing down ethnic barriers with the global gospel of Jesus Christ.

1. Jeremy Royal Howard, ed., *HCSB Study Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2010), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Acts 8".

English Standard Version - Study Bible²

Acts 8:1-25

8:1 they were all scattered. The scattering or “dispersion” (Gk. *diaspeirō*, “to scatter, disperse”) of the believers **throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria** was similar to the earlier *diaspora* (“dispersion”) of Jews throughout the world (see note on [John 7:35](#)), but this “dispersion” led to the fulfillment of the promise in [Acts 1:8](#) that the gospel would go to the end of the earth (cf. [James 1:1](#); [1 Pet. 1:1](#)).

8:3 Saul was instrumental in the persecution, as he testifies later in Acts ([22:4-5](#); [26:10-11](#)) and in his epistles ([1 Cor. 15:9](#); [Gal. 1:13, 23](#); [Phil. 3:6](#); [1 Tim. 1:13](#)).

8:4-40 Philip Witnesses beyond Jerusalem. With his message of a God not bound to one people or place, Stephen had laid the foundation for a worldwide mission. Philip, who like Stephen was a Hellenist, was the first to put Stephen’s vision into practice, witnessing to the Samaritans ([vv. 4-25](#)) and to a God-fearing Ethiopian ([vv. 26-40](#)).

The Ministry of Philip the Evangelist

c. A.D. 34?

Philip, a leader in the church in Jerusalem, began his evangelistic ministry in Sebaste (also called Samaria). God then led him south toward Gaza, where he explained the gospel to a God-fearing Ethiopian royal official. Afterwards Philip was transported by God to Azotus, where he preached and continued his ministry up to Caesarea.

8:4-25 Witness to the Samaritans. The gospel spreads to the Samaritans through the witness of Philip and the apostles Peter and John.

8:5 Philip most likely visited ancient Shechem, the main city of the Samaritans, lying at the foot of their holy mountain Gerizim. The Samaritans were a racially mixed group of partly Jewish and partly Gentile ancestry, disdained by both Jews and non-Jews (see notes on [John 4:4](#); [4:20-21](#)). They believed in Israel’s God and in many respects maintained their Jewish heritage but were not considered Jews by those from Judah.

8:6 The Samaritans would have been prepared for Philip’s message about the Christ (Messiah). They had their own expectation of a prophetic Messiah called the Taheb, who they believed would come to their holy mountain (see [John 4:20](#)). John the Baptist and Jesus had previously ministered in this area ([John 3:23](#); [4:4-42](#)). Like the apostles, **Philip** had received the Holy Spirit’s power to cast out demons and to heal, which served as a sign confirming the truth of his message.

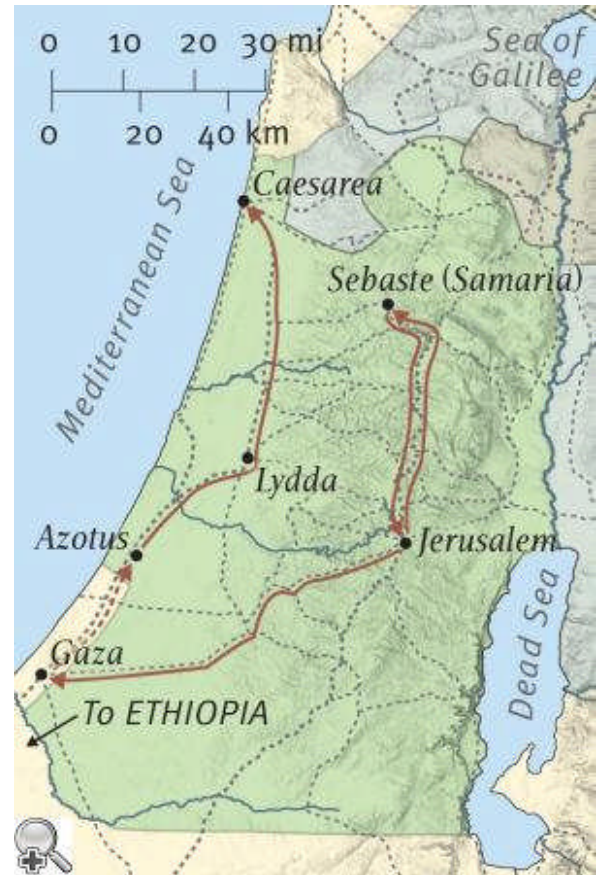
8:9 Simon claimed to have divine powers, calling himself “the Great One.” (On ancient magic, see note on [13:6](#).)

8:13 Not only the Samaritans but Simon also **believed** and was **baptized**. Commentators differ over whether Simon had genuine saving faith. Peter’s strong rebuke to Simon soon after would suggest that Simon did not have genuine saving faith (see [vv. 20-21](#)).

2. Lane T. Dennis, ed., *ESV Study Bible, The: English Standard Version*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Bibles, 2008), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Acts 8".

8:14 The apostles at Jerusalem retained their authority over the entire church. When they heard of Philip's Samaritan mission, they sent Peter and John to verify its legitimacy.

8:17 they received the Holy Spirit. Apparently in this unique case, where the gospel was first moving beyond the bounds of Judaism, the Lord sovereignly waited to give any manifestation of the full power of the Holy Spirit (cf. [vv. 15-16](#)) until some of the apostles themselves could be present (Philip was not an apostle), and therefore there would be no question at all that the Samaritans had received the new covenant empowering of the Holy Spirit in the same way that the Jewish Christians had. This would show that the Samaritans should be counted full members of the one true church, the new covenant community of God's people, founded and based at that time in Jerusalem. It would also guarantee that the Samaritans, who for many generations had been hostile toward the Jews, would not establish a separate Christian church or be excluded from the church by Jewish believers. The Spirit was given only at the hands of the apostles, to show convincingly to Samaritan and other later, non-Jewish leaders of the church that both Jews and non-Jews who believed in Jesus now had full membership status among God's people (see [Rom. 11:13-24](#); [Eph. 2:11-22](#)).



8:18 Simon saw that the Spirit was given. Since this was outwardly evident to Simon and no doubt to others as well, there must have been some outward manifestation of the Spirit. This may have been speaking in tongues, prophesying, or both (see [10:46](#); [19:6](#)), and it was an evident sign to the apostles that the Holy Spirit had fallen on the Samaritans in a similar way to what had happened to the apostles and those with them at Pentecost. **offered them money.** Simon was acting in character, because magicians often exchanged secrets for money.

8:21 Neither part nor lot is OT language for having no share in something (see [Deut. 12:12](#); [14:27](#)), and this seems to indicate that Simon has now disclosed the condition of his heart and that he did not truly belong to the people of God. The strong language in [Acts 8:23](#) also seems to class Simon as an unbeliever (but see note on [v. 13](#)).

8:24 Whether Simon was truly repentant or not is unclear. Against that possibility is the tradition tied to Simon that he was the “first heretic” and the fact that he does not indicate he will do anything to show repentance.

8:25 This transitional verse shows the apostles preaching in **many villages of the Samaritans** along their route back **to Jerusalem**—a fulfillment of [1:8](#) concerning expansion of the gospel into Samaritan territory.

NLT Life Application Study Bible³

Acts 8:1-25

8:1-4 Persecution pushed the Christians beyond Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria, thus fulfilling the second part of Jesus' command (see [1:8](#)). The persecution helped spread the Good News. God would bring great results from the believers' suffering.

8:4 Persecution forced the believers out of their homes in Jerusalem, and along with them went the Good News. Sometimes we have to become uncomfortable before we'll move. We may not want to experience it, but discomfort may be best for us because God may be working through our hurts. When you are tempted to complain about uncomfortable or painful circumstances, stop and ask if God might be preparing you for a special task.

8:5 This is not the apostle Philip (see [John 1:43, 44](#)) but a Greek-speaking Jew, "full of the Spirit and wisdom" ([6:3](#)), who was one of the seven men chosen to help with the food distribution program in the church ([6:5](#)).

8:5 Israel had been divided into three main regions: Galilee in the north, Samaria in the middle, and Judea in the south. The city of Samaria (in the region of Samaria) had been the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel in the days of the divided kingdom before it was conquered by Assyria in 722 B.C. During that war, the Assyrian king had taken many captives, leaving only the poorest people in the land and resettling it with foreigners. These foreigners had intermarried with the Jews who were left, and the mixed race became known as Samaritans. The Samaritans were considered half-breeds by the "pure" Jews in the southern kingdom of Judah, and the two groups hated each other intensely. But Jesus himself went into Samaria ([John 4](#)), and he commanded his followers to spread the Good News there ([1:8](#)).

8:7 Jesus encountered and drove out many evil spirits during his ministry on earth. Evil spirits, or demons, are ruled by Satan. Most scholars believe that demons are fallen angels who joined Satan in his rebellion against God. They can cause a person to be mute, deaf, blind, or insane and also tempt people to sin. Although they can be powerful, they are not able to read our minds and cannot be everywhere at once. Demons are real and active, but Jesus has given authority over them to his followers. Although Satan is allowed to work in our world, God is in complete control. He can drive demons out and end their destructive work in people's lives. Eventually Satan and his demons will be thrown into the lake of fire, forever ending their evil work in the world ([Revelation 20:10](#)).

8:9-11 In the days of the early church, sorcerers and magicians were numerous and influential. They worked wonders, performed healings and exorcisms, and practiced astrology. Their wonders may simply have been magic tricks, or the sorcerers may have been empowered by Satan ([Matthew 24:24](#); [2 Thessalonians 2:9](#)). Simon had done so many wonders that some even thought that he was the Messiah; but his powers did not come from God (see [8:18-24](#)).

To escape persecution in Jerusalem, Philip fled to Samaria, where he continued preaching the gospel. While he was there, an angel commanded him to meet an Ethiopian official on the road between Jerusalem and Gaza. The man became a believer before continuing on to Ethiopia. Philip then went from Azotus to Caesarea.

3. *Life Application Study Bible*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1988), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 1831-1833.



Philip's Ministry

8:14 Peter and John were sent to Samaria to find out whether or not the Samaritans were truly becoming believers. The Jewish Christians, even the apostles, were still unsure whether Gentiles (non-Jews) and half-Jews could receive the Holy Spirit. It wasn't until Peter's experience with Cornelius ([chapter 10](#)) that the apostles became fully convinced that the Holy Spirit was for all people. John had asked Jesus if they should call fire down from heaven to burn up a Samaritan village that refused to welcome them ([Luke 9:51-55](#)). Here he and Peter went to the Samaritans to pray with them.

8:15-17 This was a crucial moment for the spread of the Good News and for the growth of the church. Peter and John had to go to Samaria to help keep this new group of believers from becoming separated from other believers. When Peter and John saw the Lord working in these people, they were assured that the Holy Spirit worked through all believers—Gentiles and mixed races as well as "pure" Jews.

8:15-17 Many scholars believe that God chose to give this dramatic filling of his Spirit as a sign at this special moment in history—the spread of the Good News into Samaria through the powerful, effective preaching of believers. Normally, the Holy Spirit enters a person's life at conversion. This was a special event. The pouring out of the Spirit would happen again with Cornelius and his family ([10:44-47](#)), a sign that the uncircumcised Gentiles could receive the Good News.

8:18-23 "Everything has a price" seems to be true in our world of bribes, wealth, and materialism. Simon thought he could buy the Holy Spirit's power, but Peter harshly rebuked him. Why? The only way to receive God's power is to do what Peter told Simon to do—repent, ask God for forgiveness, and be filled with his Spirit. No amount of money can buy salvation, forgiveness of sin, or God's power. These are only gained by repentance and belief in Christ as Savior. In addition, Simon apparently wanted that ability for selfish reasons: to have power, to make money, or to gain prestige. God doesn't give us abilities to enhance our own lives. He grants us gifts so that we may bring him glory by building up others. When you find yourself wishing for an ability that would put you into the limelight or somehow enrich you personally, check your motives. Instead of sitting around wishing for talents you don't have, spend your time serving God and others with the gifts you *do* possess.

Missionaries of the New Testament and Their Journeys		
<i>Name</i>	<i>Journey's Purpose</i>	<i>Scripture Reference in Acts</i>
Philip	One of the first to preach the gospel outside Jerusalem	8:4-40
Peter and John	Visited new Samaritan believers to encourage them	8:14-25
Paul (journey to Damascus)	Set out to capture Christians but was captured by Christ	9:1-25
Peter	Led by God to one of the first Gentile families to become Christians—Cornelius's family	9:32-10:48
Barnabas	Went to Antioch as an encourager; traveled on to Tarsus to bring Paul back to Antioch; took famine relief to Jerusalem	11:25-30
Barnabas, Paul, John Mark	Left Antioch for Cyprus, Pamphylia, and Galatia on the first missionary journey	13:1-14:28
Barnabas and John Mark	Left Antioch for Cyprus after a disagreement with Paul	15:36-41
Paul, Silas, Timothy, Luke	Left Antioch to revisit churches in Galatia; then traveled on to Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia on the second missionary journey	15:36-18:22
Apollos	Left Alexandria for Ephesus; learned the complete gospel story from Priscilla and Aquila; preached in Athens and Corinth	18:24-28
Paul, Timothy, Erastus	Revisited churches in Galatia, Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia on the third major missionary journey	18:23 ; 19:1-21:14

[8:24](#) The last time a parent or friend rebuked you, were you hurt, angry, or defensive? Learn a lesson from Simon and his reaction to what Peter told him. He exclaimed, "Pray to the Lord for me." If you are rebuked for a serious mistake, it is for your good. Admit your error, repent quickly, and ask for prayer.