

The Book of Acts, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 12: The Church Scattered; Philip in Samaria

Acts 8:1-25

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Acts 8:1-25 shows God turning persecution into mission and carrying the gospel across the deep barrier between Jews and Samaritans. What is doctrinally at stake includes God's providence in using suffering to spread the gospel, the breaking of ethnic and cultural barriers (fulfilling Acts 1:8), the consistent conversion pattern of belief and baptism, the unique role of the apostles in imparting miraculous gifts through the laying on of hands, and the sobering case of Simon, a baptized man whose heart was not right and who needed to repent.

The heaviest doctrinal weight falls on Simon's sin and Peter's rebuke: the gift of God cannot be bought or seized, the heart must be right before God, and a baptized believer who falls into sin must repent and pray for forgiveness. This refutes the notion that a Christian who sins is automatically secure, and underscores the necessity of ongoing repentance. Also teach carefully that the miraculous gifts were imparted through the apostles, which helps explain why such gifts did not perpetuate beyond the apostolic age.

Yet aim at the heart. This passage calls students to keep witnessing through hardship, to cross barriers of prejudice, to receive the gospel with joy, to seek God Himself rather than His benefits, and to keep their hearts right before Him through honest, ongoing repentance.

Question 1

Student Question:

A great persecution scattered the believers, yet those who were scattered went about preaching the word (vv. 1-4). What does this reveal about God's providence and the way He advances the gospel even through suffering and opposition?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Luke records an astonishing reversal. The persecution that scattered the church looked like a catastrophe, but it became the engine of the gospel's spread. Those who were scattered went about preaching the word. The enemy's attack accomplished the opposite of its intent.

This reveals the providence of God, His wise and sovereign overruling of all things, even evil ones, for His purposes. God did not author the persecution, but He used it. Just as He turned the selling of Joseph into the saving of many (Genesis 50:20), He turned the scattering of the church into the spreading of the gospel.

Notice that the gospel advanced not through the apostles alone but through ordinary scattered believers. Every fleeing Christian became a witness. The mission was carried forward by countless unnamed disciples simply telling the good news wherever they landed.

Help students see the encouragement here. God is not thwarted by opposition; He weaves even hardship into His purposes. This does not make suffering good in itself, but it means no trial is wasted in God's hands. The same God who advanced His gospel through persecution can bring good out of our difficulties too (Romans 8:28).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's providence overruling even evil for His purposes (Genesis 50:20)
- Persecution advancing rather than destroying the gospel
- The gospel spread by ordinary scattered believers, not only apostles
- No trial wasted in God's hands (Romans 8:28)
- God's purposes not thwarted by opposition

Discussion Prompts

- How did the persecution end up serving the spread of the gospel?
- What does this reveal about God's providence?
- Where have you seen God bring good out of hardship?

Question 2

Student Question:

The scattered believers kept preaching the word even while fleeing for their lives (v. 4). When your own life is disrupted by hardship, loss, or upheaval, do you still witness and serve, or do you go silent? How can difficulty become an occasion for testimony rather than retreat?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The scattered believers did not wait for calm to resume their witness. In the very midst of upheaval, displaced and endangered, they kept telling people about Jesus. Their hardship became the highway for the gospel.

We often treat difficulty as a reason to withdraw. When life is disrupted by loss, illness, financial strain, or upheaval, our witness and service can be the first things to go silent. We feel we have nothing to give until our own house is in order.

Yet hardship can be a powerful occasion for testimony. The way a believer faces trouble, with faith, hope, and even joy, speaks louder than words. People watching us suffer well are often more open to the gospel than at any other time. Our difficulties become a stage on which the sufficiency of Christ is displayed.

Invite students to consider their own pattern. When hard times come, do I retreat into self-protection, or do I let my faith show and keep pointing others to Christ? Encourage them that we do not have to wait for ease to be a witness; some of our most powerful testimony is given precisely when life is hard.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Witness continuing through hardship rather than retreat
- Suffering faced in faith as a powerful testimony
- The sufficiency of Christ displayed in our trials
- Difficulty as an occasion for, not an obstacle to, witness

Discussion Prompts

- Do you tend to keep witnessing during hardship or go silent?
- How can the way you face difficulty become a testimony?
- Where might God want to use a current hardship for His purposes?

Question 3

Student Question:

Philip proclaimed Christ in a city of Samaria, and there was much joy in that city (vv. 5-8). Why is it significant that the gospel went to the Samaritans, a people the Jews despised, and what does this teach about the reach of the gospel across human barriers?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The journey of the gospel to Samaria is a landmark moment. Jews and Samaritans had despised one another for centuries, divided by history, race, and religion. A faithful Jew would go out of his way to avoid Samaritan territory. Yet here is Philip, a Jewish believer, proclaiming Christ to Samaritans, and they receive Him with joy.

This fulfills exactly what Jesus had said: you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). The gospel is moving outward in widening circles, crossing the very barriers that human hostility had erected.

It teaches that the gospel is for all people, including those our culture teaches us to despise or avoid. There is no group beyond its reach, no ancient enmity it cannot heal. In Christ the dividing walls come down; He makes Jew and Samaritan, and every other divided people, one (Ephesians 2:14-16).

Help students feel the radical inclusiveness of the gospel, not a vague tolerance, but a saving love that reaches every people. The much joy in Samaria is the joy of those who were once outsiders discovering they are welcome in Christ. The same gospel still reaches across every barrier today.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gospel crossing the deep Jew-Samaritan barrier
- The fulfillment of Acts 1:8 in the mission to Samaria
- The gospel for all people, including the despised
- Christ breaking down dividing walls of hostility (Ephesians 2:14-16)
- The joy of former outsiders welcomed in Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Why was it so significant that the gospel went to the Samaritans?
- How does this fulfill what Jesus promised in Acts 1:8?
- What barriers does the gospel still cross today?

Question 4

Student Question:

Philip crossed a deep cultural and racial barrier to bring the gospel to the Samaritans (v. 5). Are there people you quietly write off, because of prejudice, history, politics, or discomfort, as unlikely to receive Christ? What prejudice might God be asking you to lay down?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Philip's mission to Samaria confronts our own prejudices. We all carry, often unconsciously, a sense that certain people are unlikely, unworthy, or simply outside our concern, shaped by race, class, politics, history, or personal discomfort.

Invite honest reflection. Who do I quietly write off? Is there a group I assume would never be interested in Christ, or whom I would rather not approach? Often our prejudices hide behind reasonable-sounding excuses, but underneath is a heart that has drawn a line the gospel refuses to draw.

The gospel exposes and heals such prejudice. If Christ died for all and the gospel is for all, then no one is beyond its reach, and no one is beneath our concern. To write off a person or a group is to contradict the heart of God, who desires all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4).

Encourage students to name and lay down a specific prejudice, and to consider whom God might be calling them to love and reach. Philip went to Samaria; whom is God sending you to? The walls we maintain are walls Christ has already broken down.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Confronting prejudice that writes off certain people
- The gospel refusing the lines human hostility draws
- God's desire for all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4)

- Laying down prejudice as obedience to the heart of God

Discussion Prompts

- Who do you quietly write off as unlikely to receive Christ?
- What prejudice lies underneath that assumption?
- Whom might God be calling you to love and reach this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

When the Samaritans believed Philip's preaching, they were baptized, and later the apostles came and laid hands on them so they received the Holy Spirit (vv. 12-17). What does this passage show about the conversion pattern of belief and baptism, and about the unique role of the apostles in imparting miraculous gifts?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Luke notes the now-familiar pattern of conversion: when they 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 (v. 12). Faith in the gospel led directly to baptism, just as at Pentecost and throughout Acts. This is the consistent response to the gospel: believing and being baptized.

The passage also records something distinct: after their baptism, the apostles Peter and John came and laid their hands on the Samaritans, who then received the Holy Spirit in a special, evident way (vv. 14-17). This refers not to the indwelling of the Spirit that every Christian receives at conversion (Acts 2:38), but to the miraculous spiritual gifts that were evident enough that Simon saw and coveted them.

Notice carefully how these miraculous gifts were given: through the laying on of the apostles' hands. Philip, though full of the Spirit and able to work miracles himself, could not impart these gifts to others; only the apostles could. The Samaritans had to wait for Peter and John to come. This is a significant detail. The miraculous gifts were imparted through the apostles, which helps explain why such gifts did not perpetuate beyond the apostolic age. When the apostles passed away, the means of imparting these gifts passed with them.

Help students hold two truths. First, the conversion pattern is clear and constant: hear, believe, repent, confess, be baptized. Second, the miraculous gifts seen in Acts were tied to the apostles and their hands, not a self-renewing feature of the church. This fits the broader teaching that such gifts served to confirm the apostolic message in its foundational age and then ceased when their purpose was fulfilled and the New Testament complete (1 Corinthians 13:8-10; 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The conversion pattern of belief and baptism (v. 12)
- The distinction between the Spirit given to every believer and the miraculous gifts
- Miraculous gifts imparted only through the laying on of the apostles' hands (vv. 14-17)
- Philip unable to impart the gifts, showing their apostolic source
- The tie between the gifts and the apostles explaining their cessation
- Gifts confirming the apostolic message in its foundational age (1 Corinthians 13:8-10)

Discussion Prompts

- What conversion pattern do the Samaritans follow?
- Why is it significant that only the apostles could impart these gifts, not Philip?
- How does this help explain why such miraculous gifts did not continue beyond the apostles?

Question 6

Student Question:

Simon was drawn to the power and spectacle of the Spirit's gifts, while the Samaritans rejoiced simply to know Christ (vv. 8, 18-19). When you come to God, do you seek Him for who He is, or mainly for what you can get from Him? How can you grow to desire the Giver more than His gifts?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter sets a quiet contrast before us. The Samaritans rejoiced in Christ Himself; Simon coveted the power he saw. One sought the Giver; the other wanted the gifts. This contrast searches our own hearts.

We can approach God with a transactional heart, valuing Him chiefly for what He provides, blessings, help, comfort, answered prayers, while caring little for God Himself. This is a subtle idolatry that uses God rather than loves Him.

Invite honest reflection. When I pray, am I mostly seeking God's hand or God's face? Do I treasure God for who He is, or mainly for what He does for me? The mark of mature faith is to desire God Himself above all His gifts, to say with the psalmist, whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you (Psalm 73:25).

Encourage students toward this deeper desire. It grows as we spend time with God in worship and the word, as we thank Him not only for His gifts but for Himself, and as we learn that He is the treasure, not merely the supplier of treasures. The gifts are real and good, but the Giver is better.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Seeking God Himself rather than only His benefits
- The subtle idolatry of using God rather than loving Him

- Desiring God's face above God's hand (Psalm 73:25)
- Mature faith treasuring the Giver above the gifts

Discussion Prompts

- Do you tend to seek God for who He is or for what He gives?
- What is the difference between seeking God's hand and His face?
- How can you grow to desire the Giver more than His gifts?

Question 7

Student Question:

Simon believed and was baptized, yet his heart remained captivated by power and self-promotion (vv. 13, 18-19). What does this teach about the difference between an outward profession and a heart truly surrendered to God, and how can we tell the difference in ourselves?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Simon's case is sobering. He believed and was baptized, going through the same outward steps as the genuine converts. Yet his heart was still gripped by the old hunger for power and status. His profession was real enough on the surface, but his heart had not been surrendered.

This teaches that outward steps, however right, can coexist with a heart that has not fully bowed. Simon had been baptized, but he still wanted to use the things of God for his own glory and gain. The form was there; the surrender was not yet complete.

How can we tell the difference in ourselves? By examining our hearts and motives, not just our religious actions. Do I want God on the throne, or do I want to use God to serve my own agenda? Do the same old hungers, for power, recognition, control, gain, still drive me beneath my religious activity?

Help students see that this is a call to ongoing self-examination, not despair. Even genuine believers can find old idols reasserting themselves, as Simon did. The remedy is honesty before God, exposing our true motives, and continual surrender of the heart, not just the outward life, to Christ's lordship.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between outward profession and a surrendered heart
- Right outward steps coexisting with an unsundered heart
- Examining motives, not just religious actions
- Old idols reasserting themselves even in believers
- Ongoing surrender of the heart to Christ's lordship

Discussion Prompts

- How could Simon be baptized yet still have a heart that was not right?
- What is the difference between outward profession and true surrender?
- How can you examine whether old hungers still drive you beneath your religious life?

Question 8

Student Question:

Peter saw straight through Simon's request to the condition of his heart (vv. 21-23). What old motives, pride, the craving for control or recognition, the desire to use faith for personal gain, still surface in your own heart? How do you handle them when they appear?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Peter discerned what was hidden beneath Simon's request: your heart is not right before God. The issue was never the money or even the request itself; it was the condition of Simon's heart, still gripped by old, self-serving motives.

We all carry such motives, and they have a way of surfacing even in our spiritual lives. Pride can creep into our service. The craving for recognition can taint our giving. The desire for control can shape our prayers. The impulse to use faith for personal advantage can color our religion. These old motives do not vanish at conversion; they must be continually recognized and surrendered.

Invite honest reflection. What old motives still surface in me? Where do pride, the hunger for approval, the desire for control, or self-interest show up beneath my spiritual activity? Naming them honestly is the first step to dealing with them.

Encourage a healthy way of handling them. When these motives appear, the answer is not denial or despair but honest confession and repentance, bringing them to God, asking Him to purify our hearts, and returning again to genuine surrender. The Christian life involves an ongoing cleansing of our motives as the Spirit conforms us to Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Old self-serving motives surfacing in the spiritual life
- The need to continually recognize and surrender wrong motives
- Honest confession rather than denial or despair
- The Spirit's ongoing work of purifying the heart

Discussion Prompts

- What old motives still surface in your heart?
- Where do pride, control, or self-interest show up in your spiritual life?
- How do you handle these motives when they appear?

Question 9

Student Question:

When Simon tried to buy the gift of God with money, Peter rebuked him sharply: your heart is not right before God; repent therefore of this wickedness and pray that the intent of your heart may be forgiven (vv. 20-23). What does this teach about the gift of God, about the heart God requires, and about what a believer who falls into sin must do?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it carries several crucial truths. First, the gift of God cannot be bought or earned. Peter says, may your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money. God's gifts, His Spirit, His salvation, His grace, are freely given and cannot be purchased, merited, or seized. To think otherwise is a grave error. (From this episode the word simony came to describe the sin of trying to buy spiritual things or position.)

Second, God requires a right heart. Peter goes to the root: your heart is not right before God. God is not deceived by outward religion; He looks on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). Simon had the outward form but a heart still bound in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity. What God requires is not merely correct actions but a heart surrendered to Him.

Third, and most importantly for our doctrine, notice what Peter tells this baptized man to do: repent therefore of this wickedness, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. Simon was a baptized believer who had fallen into serious sin, and Peter does not tell him he is automatically secure or that his sin does not matter. He commands him to repent and to pray for forgiveness. This is vital. It refutes the idea of once-saved-always-saved, which would imply that a saved person's sin needs no such response. It shows that a Christian who sins must repent and pray, seeking God's forgiveness, in order to be restored.

This is the consistent teaching of the New Testament for the erring believer. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Simon Peter, who once needed restoration himself, calls Simon the magician to the same path: honest repentance and prayer. The Christian life is not a single decision that secures us regardless of how we live, but a walk of faith maintained through ongoing repentance and dependence on God's mercy.

Help students hold this with both seriousness and hope. The seriousness: sin in a believer's life is real and must be repented of, not presumed upon. The hope: the way back is always open. The God who looks on the heart also forgives the heart that turns to Him. Even Simon, in the gall of bitterness, was urged to repent and pray, and so is every one of us when we fall.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gift of God cannot be bought, earned, or seized (vv. 20-21)
- God requiring a right heart, not merely outward religion (1 Samuel 16:7)

- A baptized believer who sins commanded to repent and pray for forgiveness (v. 22)
- The refutation of once-saved-always-saved
- Ongoing repentance and confession for the erring Christian (1 John 1:9)
- The way of restoration always open to the one who turns to God

Discussion Prompts

- What does Simon's rebuke teach about the gift of God?
- Why is it significant that Peter told a baptized man to repent and pray for forgiveness?
- How does this passage correct the idea that a believer's sin needs no repentance?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back over this whole passage, the gospel advancing through persecution, crossing barriers into Samaria, and Simon's exposed heart, name one specific way the Lord is calling you to grow, in witness, in love across barriers, or in a heart kept right before Him, and what is one step you will take this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the lesson into a personal response. Acts 8 offers many invitations: to witness through hardship, to cross barriers of prejudice, to seek God Himself, and to keep our hearts right before Him through honest repentance.

Invite each person to name one concrete step. Perhaps it is to keep serving and witnessing despite a current difficulty, to lay down a prejudice and reach toward someone, to seek the Giver more than the gifts, or to repent of a wrong motive Peter's words have exposed.

Keep the focus on the heart. The chapter's deepest lesson is that God looks on the heart, and what He desires is not mere outward religion but a heart truly surrendered to Him. Transformation begins there.

Close by reminding students that the same God who advanced His gospel through scattered believers, reached the despised Samaritans with joy, and called even Simon to repentance is at work in them, ready to use them, to break down their barriers, and to keep their hearts right before Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal response to the call to witness, love, and a right heart
- God looking on the heart above outward religion
- The gospel advancing through and across every obstacle
- Transformation beginning in a surrendered heart

Discussion Prompts

- What most challenged or stirred you in this passage?
- What specific step toward witness, love, or a right heart will you take?
- How can this group encourage one another in it?