

Acts

Acts 8:2-40 - A striking contrast in attitudes

In **Acts 8:1** we see this character named **Saul** happily taking the blame for Stephen's death. But to Saul it must've seemed like a sweet victory, because for all his great knowledge of the scriptures he "could not stand up against the wisdom or the Spirit by which Stephen had spoken" in **Acts 6:10**. Saul had met more than his match in Stephen, a real blow to his pride and growing reputation as an up and coming leader of the Jewish religion. Saul was rapidly on his way to joining the religious elite.

He was so giddy with his victory over Stephen that he "began to destroy the church" in **Acts 8:3** - "going from house to house, and dragging off men and women and putting them in jail." His rampage had begun on the same day Stephen had been killed (verse 1), and it had quickly developed into "a great persecution against the church at Jerusalem," so that "all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria."

But as fast as Saul was trying to put the fires of Christianity out, he'd been unwittingly the cause of new fires being lit, because, **verse 4**, "Those who had been scattered were preaching the word wherever they went." And this is where **Philip** now enters the scene - Philip also being one of the seven, along with Stephen, who'd been chosen by the church in **Acts 6:5** to relieve the apostles from "waiting on tables."

In **Acts 8:5** "Philip went to a city in Samaria and proclaimed Christ there," which seems a little odd, though, because Philip was supposed to be looking after the neglected widows and the day-to-day needs in the rapidly growing church in Jerusalem. Samaria, however, was just a temporary assignment for Philip, but an extremely important one, because it was the start of the next part in Jesus' plan in **Acts 1:8** to expand his ministry beyond the borders of Judea to Samaria. And Philip was the best man for the job.

But why Philip, who wasn't an apostle? Why didn't the Holy Spirit send one of the apostles instead? Because the church needed to learn it was the Holy Spirit leading the church, not the apostles. And it was **the gifts the Holy Spirit was giving to every church member** that would make the church such a powerful and visible witness to Jesus being alive and continuing his ministry. And Philip, as just a regular church member, illustrates this for us.

Because like Stephen, who was just a regular church member too, Philip was also given the power to do “miraculous signs,” **verse 6**, so that people “paid close attention to what he was saying” about Jesus being alive and continuing his ministry of healing. And talk about a visible witness to Jesus, because “With shrieks,” **verse 7**, “evil spirits came out of many paralytics and cripples and they were healed.” No wonder “there was great joy in that city,” **verse 8**. Because joy is also what an accurate preaching of the good news gospel, and the power of the Holy Spirit behind it, are supposed to create.

But why did the Spirit send Philip to **just** “that city” in Samaria? Because “for some time,” **verse 9**, “a man named **Simon** had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria.” So this one city in Samaria had become a focal point for the entire country, and all because of this Simon character who was “boasting that he was someone great.” And he was having such a huge impact on “all the people, both high and low,” **verse 10**, that they actually said of him, “This man is the divine power known as the Great Power.”

Whatever that meant, the reason for people thinking it, and why they were so enamoured with Simon, was “his magic,” **verse 11**. It was so impressive that people thought it must be the power of God, which explains why the Holy Spirit sent Philip here, to clear up any misunderstanding there might be as to who the power of God **really** is working in, compared to those who **look as though** they have the power of God working in them.

And that’s important to know, because with people like Simon it can be very hard to detect. Simon, for instance, wasn’t consciously tapping into evil, nor was he vocally and publicly opposing Philip. Quite the opposite, in fact, because on hearing Philip “preach the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” in **verse 12**, Simon, like many others in Samaria, “believed” and he too “was baptized” in **verse 13**. And wherever Philip went, Simon went too, not to accuse Philip or trip him up, but because he was “astonished by the great signs and wonders he saw.” Before Philip turned up Simon had been boasting how great he was, but even he now was admitting that what Philip was doing was greater than anything he’d done.

So, what was Simon’s problem? Well, that comes clear when Peter and John visit the city after they “heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God,” **verse 14**. On arrival they realize that the Samaritans “had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus,” **verse 16**, but “the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them.” So they laid hands on the baptized and prayed for them, and “they received the Holy Spirit” as well, **verse 17**.

But how did the apostles know the Holy Spirit had not come on the Samaritans yet? Because Jesus said in John 14:17 that the Spirit would be “with you” and “in you.” And the Spirit had certainly been WITH these Samaritans, because they’d responded joyfully to the gospel message about Jesus. But if they’d “received the gift of the Holy Spirit” IN them, as promised in Acts 2:38, there would be obvious and visible changes in their attitude, just as there were in Acts 2 and 4, when Jews from vastly different backgrounds became “one in heart and mind,” happily serving and caring for each other.

Simon had noticed this too, **verse 18**, that extra power and gifts came on the baptized after this “magical” laying on of hands by the apostles. If only, then, he had that magical touch too, and it so consumed his magically inclined mind, that he’d give anything, including whatever it cost in money, to have such power in his hands as well (verses 18-19).

Peter’s “To hell with you and your money” - in the true translation of the Greek in **verse 20** - seems a bit strong, but if Simon thought he “could buy the gift of God with money” - or as we would say today, that “God’s amazing grace and favour and gifts can be earned in some way by us” - no wonder Peter erupted like a volcano, because this was the total opposite, and the most dangerous opposite too, to Jesus’ ministry of **gifting us with everything we need through the Holy Spirit**, and never by anything we do.

But the Holy Spirit gives us a vital clue in **verse 21**, as to WHY people think this way: It’s because their “heart is not right before God.” What Peter saw in Simon, for instance, was a heart “full of bitterness,” **verse 23**. Peter could clearly see that Simon had set his heart on this extra “magic” he could get through the laying on of hands, and it was obvious in Simon’s attitude that nothing would deter him from desiring and getting it; he was “captive” to it (verse 23). So, like anyone who turns really bitter when he can’t get what his mind is consumed in getting, or he’s thwarted in his plans by a last minute “spoiler,” Simon desperately needed God’s help and forgiveness (verse 22).

Simon’s casual response in **verse 24** - ‘Well, why don’t you do the praying for me, Peter, so nothing bad happens to me,’ is another vital clue in detecting who the power of God really is working in, compared to those who look as though they have the power of God working in them. It’s in their **attitude** in response to someone suggesting they need help, either because their heart is set on a wrong desire they cannot do anything about, or because they need help with their understanding of the gospel and what the Bible is really saying.

Contrast that now to the attitude in the next person Philip is directed to....

It's an **Ethiopian eunuch** of high rank in his Queen's court, "sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah" **verses 27-28**. Under orders from the Spirit, Philip asks the man if he understands what he's reading, **verses 29-30**.

The Ethiopian could have got slightly snippy at this point, being asked if he, "an important official in charge of all the Queen's treasury," **verse 27**, had any clue what he was reading actually meant. Imagine challenging Simon Magus like that. But the Ethiopian's response is: "How can I (know what it means) unless someone explains it to me?" Unlike Simon he has no problem accepting he needs help, and he invites Philip to sit in the chariot with him (verse 31).

The Ethiopian had been reading Isaiah 53:7-8, and wondering if Isaiah was talking about himself being "led like a sheep to the slaughter," and being "deprived of justice," and having his life taken early leaving him with no descendants, or was he referring to someone else (verse 34)? And why would the Ethiopian be wondering this at all? Well, for a start, being a eunuch who couldn't have descendants either, he could relate to such a man.

And the Holy Spirit knew this, of course, so at the very time the man is in deep thought about these verses that he can so easily relate to, up pops Philip who "began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus," **verse 35**.

The Holy Spirit sees the heart and beautifully sets up this little scene to help a man out - who's really struggling - with help from just the right man, Philip, who knows an opportunity when he sees one and he grabs it. And what an insight this is into the Holy Spirit and how he works. Clearly, the Spirit knows exactly where we're at, what we're studying and maybe struggling to understand, and he'll come right alongside us with people we can relate to, who have exactly the answers we're looking for.

Simon never got to experience this, and all because he refused and rejected the help the Holy Spirit brought to him in the person of Peter. The Holy Spirit set things up for Simon too, because Peter had exactly the answer Simon needed, that would have prevented Simon's bitterness taking root. But Simon's rejection served its purpose, in showing us **the willingness to learn and be corrected** is the key to who the power of God really is working in, compared to those who look as though they have the power of God working in them.

It's this clear contrast of attitudes in Acts 8, between Simon Magus and the Ethiopian eunuch, therefore, that prepares the church through all future generations in how to recognize a true follower of Jesus: It's a person with a heart that seeks, accepts and trusts the Holy Spirit's counsel and help.