



LESSON 30

The Church is persecuted and the gospel spreads

ACTS 8:1-25



There is one gospel for all kinds of people.



“Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.... So there was much joy in that city” (Acts 8:5, 8).

Supporting Truths

1. The gospel spreads through persecution.
2. The gospel is good even in hard times
3. The gospel is for all kinds of people.
4. The gospel is the same for all people.
5. The gospel unites former enemies.

Objectives

1. Explain why the believers scattered.
2. Define “gospel.”
3. Describe those to whom Philip preached.
4. Evaluate Simon’s response.
5. Explain why the apostles needed to come for the Samaritans to receive the Spirit.

STUDY THE BIBLE LESSON



The Church is persecuted and the gospel spreads • Acts 8:1–25

Lesson Summary

God used persecution to cause believers to scatter from Jerusalem. As they fled, they carried the gospel with them wherever they went—including to new groups of people like the Samaritans. Through the apostles, God welcomed the Samaritans into the church equally alongside Jewish believers. He also guarded the gospel from being twisted by Simon, who tried to use the power of the gospel for his own glory.

Spotlight on the Gospel

When God confirmed the gospel to the Samaritans, He showed that the gospel is for all people. This should encourage believers to be like Philip and tell the good news to all people, even those who are not at all like them. On the other hand, no matter where the gospel goes, it is always the same gospel. It cannot be adapted to any person's old way of living, since it demands a radical change from living for self to living for God.



The Jews resist the Holy Spirit
Acts 6:1–7:60



The Church is persecuted and the gospel spreads
Acts 8:1–25



Philip shares the gospel with the Ethiopian
Acts 8:26–40

THE GOSPEL SPREADS IN JERUSALEM

THE GOSPEL SPREADS INTO JUDEA AND SAMARIA

Lesson Commentary

There is one gospel for all kinds of people.

Jesus' last words to His disciples were, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). So far, the Holy Spirit had given the disciples incredible success in Jerusalem. But now it was time for the next step. For this to happen, believers could not stay where they were, and they needed to be open to people who were not like them. But as the gospel spread to different people, they also needed to guard against a different gospel.

Persecution spread the gospel to different places (8:1–4)

Persecution began the day Stephen was murdered (8:1). Jesus had told His disciples to expect to be treated badly for being a Christian (John 15:20; 16:2), but now it began at a furious pace. Saul was the fiercest of the persecutors (Acts 8:3). He really thought he was serving God by tearing the church apart (22:3–4). Ironically, God did use Saul's persecution! He used it to get the church to do its job of spreading the gospel.

It is not surprising that many believers fled, but what they did as they fled is surprising. They lost friendships, possessions, and homes, and some lost mothers and fathers too. If that happened to you right now, would you go around saying you had good news? That is what the believers were doing, since "preaching the word" (8:4) literally means "evangelizing" or "speaking good news." They knew it is good to have Jesus even if that means losing everything else.

Philip spread the gospel to a different group of people (8:5–13)

One of these evangelizing believers was Philip. Like Stephen, he had been chosen to help the apostles because he was full of the Spirit (6:5). Philip went to Samaria, north of Judea. This was very unusual, because Jews and Samaritans did not get along (Luke 9:52–53; John 4:9). About 700 years before, the

Assyrians had deported the Jews living in this area, and then Assyria had brought in people from other nations to take their place (2 Kgs 17:6). For a long time, these people worshiped God and idols at the same time (17:33). By the time of Jesus, they only worshiped God, but there was still lots of confusion (John 4:20–24). They needed the truth, but would a Jew come to Samaritans, and would Samaritans listen to a Jew?

To Philip, the good news was more important than cultural differences. Since the Samaritans already looked forward to the Messiah (4:25), Philip announced that Jesus was the One (Acts 8:5). He proclaimed the "name of Jesus Christ," teaching all about who Jesus is (8:12b). He also preached about the **kingdom of God**, describing the blessing of God's rule over saved people, both in this world and even more in the world to come (8:12a). The Samaritans listened because Philip miraculously healed and cast out demons, confirming his message and his love for the Samaritans (8:6–7, 13). The Samaritans received the message with joy (8:8, 12), and through baptism they affirmed their loyal allegiance to Jesus.

But Philip was not the only one doing signs in Samaria. Simon the sorcerer had already gained a reputation as "the Great Power of God," a unique agent of divine power (8:9–11). Sorcery at that time was a combination of science and superstition, combining astrology, divination, and occult practices with history, mathematics, and agriculture. It could be trickery or demonic or both. Yet both Simon and the people realized that Philip's power was greater. For some, this led them to fully receive Philip's message (8:12). But it was also possible to interpret the gospel's power as nothing more than an upgrade to Samaria's traditional superstition (8:13).

THINK ABOUT IT

Are you willing to talk about Jesus to people you are not comfortable around?



THINK ABOUT IT

Scripture gives clear instructions for dealing with Satan and demons today (Eph 6:10–18; Jas 4:6–10).



STUDY THE BIBLE LESSON

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The apostles guarded against a different gospel (8:14–25)

It is a good thing Peter and John came to help sort this out (Acts 8:14). They had two issues to deal with. First, they had to confirm that the gospel really is available to all people, even to strange and hostile people. They made this clear by visibly putting their hands on the Samaritans so that they received the Spirit (8:17). Normally, believers receive the Holy Spirit the moment they believe (Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 12:13). But this situation was unique: for the first time in history, people were welcomed into God's family without having to become Jews. By delaying the Spirit, God showed that the Samaritans had the same Spirit and were under the same leadership of the apostles. Despite their differences, they were now "one body" sharing "one Spirit . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Eph 4:4–5). When the apostles saw this, they also evangelized in Samaria (Acts 8:25).

The apostle's second job in Samaria was to guard the purity of the gospel. Although the gospel is for people from all cultures, it cannot be modified to fit the trends of any culture. But this is what Simon was trying to do. By trying to buy the power of conferring the Spirit (8:18–19), Simon twisted the gospel in three ways.

First, Simon treated the gospel as something to glorify himself. All along, he had been infected by pride. He had been the greatest person in Samaria, but when Philip came, Simon realized that Philip's power was greater. Simon followed Philip in order to learn the secret of Philip's power. Then, when he saw the Spirit come through the apostles, he realized he had found the source. Treating the apostles like fellow magicians, he tried to set a price to buy the secret of their power. In the end, Simon wanted to use the Holy Spirit for his own glory, not be used by the Holy Spirit for the glory of God (Eph 5:18). Peter rightly rebuked him (Acts 8:20), for nothing is more offensive to God than pride (Prov 16:5; Jas 4:6).

Second, Simon thought the gospel was something he could just add to his old way of life (Acts 8:20). For him, the Spirit was just a way to become a more powerful sorcerer than before. Simon really did believe in the power of God, but like the demons, that faith did not include trust and submission to God's will (Jas 2:19). He did not want God to radically change the direction of his life (Isa 55:6; 1 Cor 6:11) or transform him from the inside out (2 Cor 5:17). He still wanted to live his old life, only now he hoped to have more power to do it. Again, Peter was right to say that Simon's heart was not right before God (Acts 8:21).

Third, Simon thought the gospel was compatible with his sin (8:22). Because Simon was seeking his own glory, he was full of bitterness whenever anyone or anything overshadowed him (8:23a). Because he was still committed to his old way of life, he was still a slave of his own sin (8:23b). Even his request for prayer was detestable (8:24). He only asked to get rid of the consequences of his sin, not the sin itself, for sin itself was not repulsive to him. In addition, Simon still thought it was all about power. He knew the apostles had more power, so he thought their prayers would be most effective for him. But the root of man's sin is pride, so the only solution is **humility—to humbly admit that we are unworthy, and to depend entirely on God's grace.**

While the gospel is available to all kinds of people, there are not all kinds of gospels. There is one gospel, which is always aimed at the glory of God. Therefore the difference between a true believer and a fake believer is this: the first is controlled by love for God (2 Cor 5:14), the second tries to control God out of love for himself. This is bad news for people like Simon, but it is good news for people ready to surrender—no matter what kind of person they may be.

THINK ABOUT IT
Simon treated the Holy Spirit's power like a genie in a bottle to get his own wishes.



Lesson Outline

There is one gospel for all kinds of people.

AGES 3–5 LESSON OUTLINE



Accept the gospel . . .

1. Because it is good even when life is not (8:1–4).
2. Because it is offered to everyone (8:5–17, 25).
3. By letting it change you (8:18–24).

AGES 6–11 LESSON OUTLINE



1. Persecution spread the gospel to different places (8:1–4)
 - Believers fled from severe persecution (8:1–3).
 - Fleeing believers spread the good news (8:4).

2. Philip spread the gospel to a different group of people (8:5–13)
 - Philip proclaimed the Messiah to the Samaritans (8:5).
 - Philip's miracles confirmed his message (8:6–8).
 - Philip faced a threat to the purity of the Samaritans' faith (8:9–13).

3. The apostles guarded against a different gospel (8:14–25).
 - The gospel is one gospel for all kinds of people (8:14–17, 25).
 - The gospel is not for glorifying yourself (8:18–20).
 - The gospel is not something to add to your old life (8:21).
 - The gospel is not compatible with your sin (8:22–24).



TEACH THE BIBLE LESSON

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Lesson Questions

Use these questions to teach or to review this week's lesson.



Ages 3–5 Lesson Questions

- 1. Why did Christians leave Jerusalem?**
Because they were being persecuted.
- 2. Who preached the gospel in Samaria?**
Philip.
- 3. What did the Samaritans receive when the apostles came?**
The Holy Spirit.
- 4. Who tried to get the Spirit's power to use for himself?**
Simon.



Ages 6–11 Lesson Questions

- 1. Who was the fiercest persecutor of the Jerusalem church?**
Saul.
- 2. Where did Philip preach the gospel?**
In Samaria.
- 3. Why was this unusual?**
The Jews and Samaritans were enemies, fighting over land and worship.
- 4. Why did the Samaritans not receive the Holy Spirit right when they believed?**
To make it clear that the Samaritans were part of the same church as Jewish believers.
- 5. What was Simon's belief like?**
It was factual: he believed that there was real power in the gospel. However, it was not trusting: he did not want to submit to the control of the gospel.
- 6. Why did Simon want the Holy Spirit?**
To use for his own glory. To make himself a more powerful sorcerer.
- 7. What did Simon think about his sin?**
He did not mind his sin, so long as he could avoid sin's consequences.
- 8. What is the main problem in a fake believer?**
He only "believes" in God for what God can do for him. His "faith" is still all about loving himself, not loving God.

Lesson Activities

Choose from the following ideas to introduce, illustrate, and apply this week's lesson.

AGES 3–5



INTRODUCE

TRAVELING LIGHT

In today's lesson, Philip travels to Samaria. Once he arrived, he shared the gospel with the people there. To illustrate the idea of traveling to another place, bring a suitcase and clothes to class. Ask the children what they would take on a trip. Explain that because of the persecution that was happening, many of the believers had to pack their things and leave quickly to escape harm.

DARK AND WHITE HEARTS

Give the children both dark and white clay (or Play-Doh). Explain that every person is born with a dark (sinful) heart and help them make a heart with the dark clay. Talk about the bad attitudes and actions that come from a dark heart. Next have them create a white heart. Explain that the only people who can have a white heart are those who trust Jesus to forgive their sins. In today's lesson, we will learn about a man named Simon who would not confess to God that he had a dark (sinful) heart. We will also learn about a group of people who confessed that they had dark (sinful) hearts. Because they confessed their sin to Jesus, these people were given white hearts.



ILLUSTRATE

GOSPEL SPREADER

Illustrate how persecution encourages the spread of the gospel with a block of cheese and a cheese grater. At first the block of cheese (the gospel) is confined to one location. But after passing the block of cheese over the grater (persecution), the cheese (gospel) is able to be spread to many different locations. Spread the cheese (gospel) to all the children by passing out a small portion of cheese to each child.

THE POWER OF THE CROSS

While the gospel is available to all kinds of people, there are not all kinds of gospels. There is one gospel. As the gospel spreads, it does not change; it remains the same. However, as people respond to the gospel, they are changed by the gospel. Illustrate this with a number of different people made out of different colors of Play-Doh and one small cross (could be made out of two popsicle sticks fastened together with hot glue). What happens as you press each Play-Doh person against the cross? They are changed by the gospel (it leaves its imprint on the people). Does the cross (gospel) change? No. It remains the same, no matter which person is pressed against it.



APPLY

THE GOSPEL SPREADS

See *Year 3 Craft Book, Book 2*.

Materials: Craft sheets, crayons, scissors, tape, hole punch, tape.

Directions: Color the craft pages. Hole punch where indicated. Pass a yarn through the holes. Tape the "Bible" image to the yarn so that it can move from Jerusalem to Samaria.

The Gospel Spreads
See *Year 3 Craft Book, Book 2*.



TEACH THE BIBLE LESSON

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AGES 6–8



INTRODUCE

SAY IT IS NOT SO!

Bring a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup candy bar to class. Explain that the size of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups has gotten smaller over the years. The reason: to keep pace with inflation. Instead of raising prices, they have made their peanut butter cups smaller to reduce costs. However, today we're going to learn about something that never changes: the gospel. It is the same for every person in every place in every period of history.

SWORN ENEMIES

Today's story is similar to the story of Jonah. In both stories, God's messenger brings the message of salvation to the Jews' enemies. And in both cases, a large number of people respond to the gospel and receive salvation. However, unlike the story of Jonah, today's story is about a faithful evangelist who did not hesitate to share the good news with those who were his sworn enemies.



ILLUSTRATE

FAILURE TO LAUNCH

Describe (or show a video) of a mother bird forcing a baby bird out of the nest. This is necessary so that the baby bird begins to fly. This is kind of like what happened in Acts 8:1–25. God used persecution to get believers out of Jerusalem and spread the gospel to Judea and Samaria and beyond.

PERSECUTION AND THE GOSPEL

Fill a small, shallow cup or dish (maybe Styrofoam) with red food coloring and float it in a glass bowl filled with water. While the container is floating in the water, share with the children how the gospel had mostly been contained within the city of Jerusalem. As you start to talk about the persecution that was inflicted upon the church, begin to throw the small rocks into the water. The water should begin to rock violently enough so that the red food coloring inside the container spills into the water. The children will be able to visibly see how the food coloring makes its way throughout the water. Such a visual illustration will demonstrate how the persecution against the church managed to spread the gospel.



APPLY

CHASING THE HOLY SPIRIT

See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 2.

Materials: Craft sheet, white paper, scissors, tape, and crayons.

Directions: Cut the pieces from the craft sheet. Color the boy Samuel. Make cuts on the picture along the dotted lines. Place the strip with the arrow behind the picture. Tape another piece of paper to the back to form a pocket that is tight enough to hold the strip, but loose enough to allow it to move up and down. Color the back strip accordingly. Move strip up and down to change Samuel from being asleep to being awake.

Chasing the Holy Spirit
See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 2.



AGES 9–11



INTRODUCE

UNCHANGING GOSPEL

The word for carbonated drinks is different in different parts of the U.S. It is “pop” in the Midwest (Ohio, Michigan, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Iowa) and in some portions of the Pacific Northwest and the Mountain West. It is “soda” on the two coasts, as well as Hawaii, St. Louis, Missouri and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. “Soda pop” is used by some in the Mountain West. “Soft drink” or “cold drink” is popular in New Orleans and east Texas. The name changes as you move about the country. However, in today’s lesson we are going to learn about something that remains the same in every location, culture, and time period: the gospel.

BLOOD OF THE MARTYRS

Bring in some seeds. Last week’s lesson ended with Stephen being brutally murdered for his faith (Acts 7:60). What kind of effect do you think this had on the proclamation of the gospel? Well, believe it or not, the murder of Stephen, and the persecution of Christians that followed, only accelerated the spread of the gospel! As Tertullian noted in his *Apologeticus*, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church” (show the seeds).



ILLUSTRATE

DELAYED OUTPOURING OF THE SPIRIT

The Samaritans were half Jewish, but they hated the Jews. The Jews hated them, too. When the gospel started to spread, Jews may have doubted that Samaritans could be Christians. However, the Holy Spirit came on the Samaritans just like it did the Jews. Because the Holy Spirit came to the Samaritans in a special way, God showed that the Samaritans were Christians just like the Jews. Use the illustration of an adopted child getting the same last name as the rest of the family. Even though the adopted child came later, he gets the same name and everyone recognizes he belongs to the family.

GENIE IN A BOTTLE

Simon tried to buy the power of the Holy Spirit. He did not want to be used by the Holy Spirit for the glory of God; rather, he wanted to use the Holy Spirit’s power to glorify himself. In so doing, he treated the power of the Holy Spirit like a genie in a bottle. He was only interested in what the Holy Spirit could do for him and would not submit to the Spirit.



APPLY

OPPOSITE EFFECT

It seems like a sure way to get someone to do something is to tell them repeatedly that they cannot do it! Have you ever witnessed this in your life? In today’s lesson, we saw something that brought about the opposite effect we might think it would: persecution sparked the spread of the gospel. Persecution also brings about the opposite effect we might think it would in our personal lives. Have you ever experienced persecution for your belief in the gospel? Why might the experience of persecution actually be a good thing (Matt 5:10–12)? Persecution may be difficult, but its outcome is of incalculable value, both for the spread of the gospel as well as our own spiritual reward.