



# LIFE ACROSS THE BORDER

SERIES: *LIFE UNLEASHED*

Acts 8:1-25

13th Message

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## I. Intro

Good morning. I just got the power bill in the mail this week and it was pretty high. But, it made me think about how our lives revolve around power. Did you ever think about that?

Your phones that many of you are looking at right now require power. The internet requires power. Your tweets and twitters require power. Our cars require power. The jumbo tron at Levi's Stadium requires power. And, all of this power is generated and distributed by a company we call PG&E—Pacific, Gas and Electricity.

And, sometimes this company will ruin our entire day because they'll turn the power off to our house, fix something, then turn it back on. And, meanwhile, we've slept through a test or work or getting the kids to school or whatever. At the very least, we are required to reset all the clocks in the entire house.

But, power, does make the world go round. Power makes our world spin. And, you could say that the book of Acts is a book about power.

## II. Review

Way back in chapter 1, verse 8, Jesus, just before he ascends, tells his disciples to wait in Jerusalem until what? Until they receive the power of the Holy Spirit.

**But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.**(Acts 1:8 ESV)

So, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the disciples will be Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. This is the road map for the book of Acts. The book of Acts is the story of how these witnesses carry the good news of Jesus to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth through the power of the Spirit.

Now, when Jesus says that, you can imagine how the apostles respond. Jerusalem—no problem. Judea—no problem. Samaria—no way. We're not going there are we?? Today, we see the Gospel go to Samaria through the power of the Holy Spirit.

## III. The Power of Persecution

**And Saul approved of his execution. 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. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.** (Acts 8:1-3)

So, the church scatters after the stoning of Stephen. There is a mega persecution against this early church, meaning this is more than they have experienced so far. The apostles, however, stay in Jerusalem

to remain as leaders of the Jerusalem church, as Saul continues the persecution against the church. But, much of the church is scattered.

Jesus takes the saltshaker and shakes the salt around the world. We are the salt of the earth, but what use is salt if it's left in the shaker. It needs to be shaken in order to be useful. And, look what happens in verse 4:

**Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.**

Those who were scattered went out preaching the word. And, what we are going to see is that there is much fruit from this shaking. We don't like persecution, but the power of persecution is that God accomplishes his purposes through persecution.

I just signed up for a newsletter from a website that sends updates on Christian persecution throughout the world. It's called Morning Star News and they send out almost weekly updates on the persecution happening around the world. It's been eye-opening to read these updates. And, we don't face persecution like others around the world, but we do face adversity in different ways: sin, death of loved ones, loneliness, health issues, busy-ness, . We all face different kinds of adversity. And, God uses it to accomplish his purposes. But, typically we don't see it until we reflect back on it.

Think back in your life – when has God used adversity in your life to accomplish his purposes? And, may that encourage you now with whatever adversity you are going through. I know for me, when I graduated from college, I landed a great job as an Aerospace Engineer but I had to move away from friends and family. I ended up working odd hours which means I fell completely out of community and out of relationships. I was pretty lonely. But, through that experience, God moved me to California where I found the 20-Something group here at PBCC. Through that very difficult time, God moved mountains in my life and really strengthened my faith.

So, for many of you in the midst of adversity, I want to encourage you to stand firm and trust that God is going to accomplish great/ mega things through it, as he shakes his saltshaker.

Our story now focuses in on one man, Philip, and how he was the salt to Samaria.

## IV. The Power of the Non-Professional

**Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. 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. So there was much joy in that city.** (vv 5-8)

Well, the spotlight falls on Philip. Now, this Philip is not the Apostle Philip, but Philip the server, one of the seven chosen to help with the daily distribution in chapter 6.

And, Philip goes to Samaria to preach the good news. The region of Samaria is almost 40 miles north of Jerusalem, about a 2-3 day walk. We don't know if Luke is meaning the city of Samaria or the region of Samaria. Regardless, we know that the Jews and Samaritans hated each other. Jews had no dealings with Samaritans. They were enemies and had been enemies for a long, long time. This animosity goes back to when the Israelite kingdom split between the Northern tribes and the Southern tribes. When the Assyrians captured the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC, they imported Assyrians, pagan people, into the land who intermarried with the Israelites. From that time, Jews considered Samaritans as half-breeds. They weren't true Jews. Later, the animosity increased when the Samaritans developed a rival worship center on Mt. Garazim. They then essentially developed their own religion based entirely on the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. So the Jews considered the Samaritans heretics. So much so, that Jews would not even walk on Samaritan territory.

If a Jew wanted to go north, they would typically walk east, cross the Jordan river, then walk north past the Sea of Galilee then walk west again so that they would not need to walk on Samaritan soil. They might travel twice the distance just so they wouldn't step on Samaritan soil. They hated each other. One popular prayer in the first century said this, "and, Lord, do not remember the Samaritans in the resurrection" <sup>1</sup> So, for Philip to go to Samaria is a huge deal! This is Selma, Alabama in 1965.

This is why John 4 is so amazing. John 4 is where Jesus travels through Samaria, being led by the power of the Spirit to jump over every possible social barrier (gender, ethnicity, status, etc) to engage with a Samaritan woman at a well. Remember that story? Jesus is not a racist. Jesus isn't a sexist. Jesus does not discriminate. Jesus preaches the good news to this outcast of a woman, offering her living water. And, because of that encounter, we know that there are believers in Samaria because at the end of the conversation, the text says this:

**Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. (John 4:39-41)**

So, there are believers there, but still, it would very much be uncomfortable territory for Philip. However, it appears people are struck by the power that Philip exhibits. He exhibits power in his words and people paid attention to what he said. And his words are validated by powerful deeds.

Before moving on, I want you to notice two things about these verses:

- First of all, notice who Philip is. He's no super apostle. He's not a professional. He's simply one of the seven servers from chapter 6, a refugee in a hostile environment. He's an ordinary man. I hate that word ordinary, but he is a non-professional. But, through his being filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, the kingdom advances mightily. Because of him, a non-professional, revival happens in a very scary place. A few weeks ago, we had Robert and Siakor Sundah here sharing about the Ebola epidemic in Liberia. And, I could use them as examples of ordinary people doing extraordinary things. But, how about the people who support them from our body? We just had our craft fair.

Once again, an amazing event. And a group of men and women pull that off in amazing ways. It's really fun to see. And,

I was here a few weeks ago and ran into Carol Ross who is on that team. Carol was here preparing as it seems she does year around, with our trips, with the garage sale, and other things which I probably don't even know about. And, she's a non-professional – she's not a pastor. She is an ordinary person that through the power of the Spirit is doing extraordinary things, advancing the kingdom. You don't have to be a super Christian to impact lives! So, I just told Carol all of that. She said, "It brings me such joy to help those kids over there."

- And, that brings me to my second point. Notice the result: There was much joy in the city. If you want to evaluate a movement or a church or your faith, this is a good place to start. When the Holy Spirit is present and grace and mercy and truth and love are on the move, joy inevitably results. Much joy characterizes the Gospel.

So, the power of the Spirit moves forward in Samaria, but up until this point, the city was under the influence of a very different power.

## V. The True Power vs. The Counterfeit Power

**But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great." And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But 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. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed. (vv 9-13)**

So, we meet a new character in our story, Simon, the great and powerful, who had many followers himself. Who is this guy? He's a magician. This is not to be confused with today's illusionists. This is no David Copperfield. This is a man into witchcraft, sorcery and the occult. He considers himself a great and powerful one, maybe implying divinity.

We know from other sources more about this man, who is called Simon Magus, or Simon the Magician. Justin Martyr from the second century said that Simon declared he was "God above all power and authority and might", that "he thought to be a god" and that the Samaritans "confess this man to be their first god"<sup>2</sup>. Irenaeus, also from the 2nd century, claims Simon was one of the founders of Gnosticism.

And, this Simon has a power about him and a lot of people are following him because of it. But, when Philip arrives, it's power vs. power. It's Clayton Kershaw vs. Buster Posey, only here there is no question as to who is more powerful. It isn't even a match, for the people recognize the greater power in Philip and begin following him. They all move from the counterfeit power of Simon to the real power of the Holy Spirit. The text even says that Simon believed and was baptized. The one who had created amazement and a following, now is amazed and begins following Philip. He figures *if you can't beat 'em, join 'em*. But, commentators are mixed on whether it was genuine or not because of what comes later in our text. But now, Peter and John enter the scene.

## VI. The Power is Given

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. (vv 14-17)

This is a tough text. And, a couple groups of Christians have taken from this small paragraph the belief that Christian conversion occurs in two steps, that the reception of the Spirit is subsequent to salvation. Let me say a few words about this. In this case, I think we need to use the principle of looking at the entirety of scripture versus isolating a single text. It's always dangerous to isolate one section of scripture to build a theology around. We need to learn to interpret scripture by scripture, each part in light of the whole. And, we should always ask ourselves, *what is the general teaching of scripture in light of the text I'm reading now?* And, specifically to Acts, we need to be aware that this is a new stage of revelation. Things are in flux. The Holy Spirit is moving into new places. And, we need to be careful of building a theology of the Holy Spirit from this book alone.

On the topic of conversion, scripture is very clear that it is a single stage event. We call it conversion. God calls it regeneration or being born again, where he puts new life into us and we become new creatures in Christ. At that point, we receive from God the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is a one stage event. 'According to Peter's first sermon, forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit are twin initial blessings which God bestows on everyone whom he calls, and who repents, believes and is baptized (Acts 2:38-39). Further, Paul agrees with Peter. God gives his Spirit to all his children, so that 'if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ' (Rom 8:9; cf. Rom 8:14-16; 1 Cor 6:19; Gal 3:2, 14; 4:6).'<sup>3</sup> Now, certainly we will have more experiences and hopefully deeper experiences of the Holy Spirit in our lives as we grow, but we receive the person of the Holy Spirit when we become a follower of Jesus. And so, what we are getting here in this story in Acts seems to be a very unique situation which Luke points out when he says in verse 16, "for he had not yet fallen on any of them".

So, the question becomes, why? Why does God withhold his Spirit in this situation? And, I think the reason goes back to this deep and long held hatred between the Jews and Samaritans. The Gospel had been welcomed by the Samaritans, but would the Samaritans be welcomed by the Jews? If Peter and John, the heavyweights, do not arrive, it is possible that we would get two separate churches going right from the start, a Jewish one and a Samaritan one. The delay in the dispensing of the Holy Spirit teaches the Samaritans that they need their Jerusalem brothers, and teaches the Jerusalem brothers that the Samaritans are included with them. The Samaritans are not second class citizens, but just as worthy as any Jew.

So, the apostles lay their hands on the Samaritans and the Holy Spirit is poured out on them. Luke doesn't tell us how it was known that the Holy Spirit had been given, but there must have been a visible manifestation, just like at Pentecost. In fact, this text is generally recognized as the Samaritan Pentecost. But, Simon the magician enters back into the story at this point.

## VII. The Power To Give The Power Is Wanted

Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

Now when they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans. (vv 18-25)

Simon is watching. And, when he sees the power of the Holy Spirit go out through the laying on of hands, he wants it. Remember, this is his narcotic. He lives and breathes for power like this. It's addictive and Simon is an addict. Notice he doesn't want the Holy Spirit, he wants the power to give the power. Essentially, he just wants the prestige that comes along with having this great power. He wants to be able to harness this power for his own gain. He sees potential for gaining more followers which means he'll make more money. So, he opens up his wallet and says, name the price, Peter.

And, his name forever lives in infamy. This is where the term 'simony' comes from. Do you know this term? This term is used to describe the practice of buying or selling the things of God or the attempt to buy spiritual office, status or power.

But, Peter, full of the power of the Holy Spirit, knows Simon's heart is not right and rebukes him strongly. The Holy Spirit cannot be bought because it is a gift. And, Peter has strong words for him; he's in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity. Essentially, Peter is saying that Simon is still a prisoner to sin. His heart is not right.

Although it appears that Simon repents in verse 24, it is a lame request as he doesn't pray for forgiveness himself but asks Peter to do it. He shows no sign of repentance or contrition. And, Luke doesn't seem to be interested in Simon's fate as he moves quickly onto the apostles heading back to Jerusalem, preaching as they go.

## VIII. The Power in Humility

That's our story for today. Now, as we look back over this story, I think Luke wants us to consider the nature of power and greatness. First of all, the word 'great' is used seven times in our passage.

What is true greatness?

And, to answer that question, I think Luke wants us to pay attention to the *pay attentions* in the text: verses 6 and 10. People are *paying attention* to Philip and what he is saying, and people are *paying attention* to Simon and what he is saying. But, notice the clear difference: Philip is proclaiming Christ and Simon is proclaiming himself.

- The one humbly points away from self; the other proudly points toward self.
- The one humbly exalts Christ; the other proudly exalts self.
- The one is others focused. The other is 'selfie' focused.

True greatness is found in humility through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is never appropriate for Christians to exalt themselves. Jesus encountered this with his disciples:

**They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, “What were you discussing on the way?” But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, “If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.” (Mark 9:33-35)**

Soon after this, he will end up in the upper room with those same disciples where he will get out a towel and a basin and wash the disciples' feet. That's true power.

CS Lewis said that “pride is the worse sin. He says it is the essential vice... Everything else is merely a fleabite compared to pride.”<sup>4</sup> James 4:6 says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

In the intro to John Stackhouse's book *Humble Apologetics*, he relates a story of how a famous Christian apologist was invited to speak at his friend's college campus. The main auditorium on campus was filled with students who had come out to hear this man. In the intro for the evening, the apologist was introduced extravagantly with many titles and degrees. He then gave a fantastic hour long speech and began taking questions. As question after question was lobbed at him, “he knocked each one out of the park.” Then came the last question where a graduate student challenged Christianity, the Bible and this man. The apologist replied with a few questions that essentially derailed this student's entire argument, but beyond that, made the graduate student look helpless and foolish. He completely embarrassed him. But, the apologist had won. As John's friend left the meeting, he got up from his seat and began to hum a little hymn, ‘Onward, Christian Soldiers! Marching as to war...’ The Lord's champion had triumphed, he thought! God had delivered the enemy into our hands! What a great night for the Gospel!

But, then he found himself walking behind two women, and as they passed through the last set of doors, his friend heard one of them say, “I don't care if the son of a gun is right, I still hate his guts.”<sup>5</sup>

I tell that story because we can be prideful even when we are sharing Christ. We can exalt ourselves even when we think we are exalting Christ just to win the argument. And, we destroy people in the process.

Real greatness, found in the power of the Spirit, comes in humbly pointing to Christ, loving and serving others and giving myself away. We have to remember that the Living God of the Universe is all-powerful and how does he wield his power? He comes down to us in humility and dies on a cross. We point to a God who dies on a cross. The power at the center of the universe is sacrificial love. And, as we saw today, no other power, not even demonic power can match that.

And, where does this kind of love and service start?

- In the kitchen when I'm doing dishes for my wife.
- Or, taking out the trash when it's not your turn.
- Or, listening when you have other more pressing things to do.

It starts with the little things. It starts in the home. It starts with a simple prayer each morning, ‘Lord, keep me humble through the filling of your Holy Spirit.’

## IX. Conclusion

Because we have been called to greatness. We have been called to greatness through the power of the Spirit. We have been called to greatness by humbly looking like God and pointing to Jesus. That's what true greatness looks like. I used this picture on the front of our worship guide for a reason. As you go to work tomorrow, how will you power yourself up? Will you power yourself up on yourself, as Simon did, or will you power yourself up on the Spirit?

*This week, may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

*Be great this week by pointing toward Jesus and loving others through the power of the Holy Spirit.*

1. Hughes, Kent. *Acts: The Church Afire* (Illinois: Crossway, 1996), p III.
2. Schnable, Eckhard. *Acts: Exegetical Commentary on the NT* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), p 407.
3. Stott, John. *The Message of Acts* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1990), p 156.
4. Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*. (New York: MacMillan, 1952), p 109.
5. Stackhouse, John. *Humble Apologetics* (New York: Oxford, 2002), p XIII-XVI.

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