

# THIS WEEK'S MESSAGE

APRIL 11TH–12TH, 2026 // BOOK OF ACTS

## SAUL (ACTS 8:1–3)

### “SAUL AGREED WITH PUTTING HIM TO DEATH.” (V. 1A)

Stephen's execution was something that a certain young man named Saul approved of heartily and with great pleasure (*suneudokeo*).

- As a zealous Pharisee, Saul would have seen Christianity as a dangerous distortion of Israel's faith—blasphemous in its claims about Jesus and threatening to the purity of the law and temple.

### “A SEVERE PERSECUTION BROKE OUT” (V. 1B)

Stephen's death was only the beginning, and Saul was only one of the many great persecutors of Christians in the city of Jerusalem.

- This is the first great campaign of persecution against the church. Earlier in Acts, it was only the apostles who were arrested and beaten, but here every Believer in Jesus was threatened with violence and death.

### “ALL EXCEPT THE APOSTLES WERE SCATTERED” (V. 1C)

In Acts 1:8, Jesus had told His followers to bear witness in all Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

- Up to this point, they had stayed in the city of Jerusalem.
- What Satan tried to use to stop the Christian movement, God used to spread it. Sometimes God moves us when we refuse to move.

### “DEVOUT MEN BURIED STEPHEN” (V. 2)

Another surprising outcome from Stephen's persecution is that “devout men” buried and mourned over Stephen.

- “Devout men” could be describing non-Christian Jews. Maybe Stephen's death was troubling enough that even those outside the movement honored him, showing a level of moral unease about the execution.

### “SAUL... WAS RAVAGING THE CHURCH” (V. 3)

To “ravage” the church is to actively attempt to completely disrupt, destroy, and dismantle it through ongoing physical violence.

- It is to make war against the Christian movement and commit to seeing it come to an end.
- Saul was on a hate-filled campaign that involved raiding house churches and dragging men and women off to prison.

### HOW CAN GOD ALLOW THIS TO HAPPEN?

- The death of Stephen, as tragic as it was, led to devout Jews in Jerusalem being convicted and eventually honoring his sacrifice.
- The persecution in Jerusalem led to the gospel spreading as Believers scattered across the region.
- The hatred of Saul became the very means by which God would raise up a chosen instrument.

## SCATTERED (ACTS 8:4–8)

### RELIGIOUS REFUGEES

What would you do if you were driven from your home and scattered because of religious persecution and violence?

- Would you find a quiet, safe place to live and enter your own “witness protection program”?
- The early Believers who were scattered went on their way “preaching the word.” They continued to live out their faith boldly (v. 4).

Philip was one of the men chosen alongside Stephen to serve in the church, and he ended up in a city in Samaria (v. 5).

- About 750 years before this, the Assyrians conquered this area of northern Israel and deported all the wealthy and middle-class Jews from the area.
- Then pagan Gentiles intermarried with the lowest classes of remaining Jews in northern Israel.

### FROM THIS INTERMARRIAGE CAME THE SAMARITANS.

Most 1st-Century Jews hated the Samaritans. James and John once tried to convince Jesus to send down fire and burn up the Samaritans (Luke 9:51–56).

- There was tension between Jews and Samaritans that's evident in the Gospels.
- When Jesus said to preach the gospel to ALL NATIONS, Philip had listened (v. 5).

### ALL PEOPLE (EVEN THOSE YOU DON'T LIKE) NEED CHRIST.

Even though we nod in agreement at the words of Jesus in the Great Commission, the truth is we often have a certain type of person (or group of people) that we hold irritation or animosity towards.

- Racism is still a thing. Hatred of Muslims, Hindus, homosexuals, and others with different political ideologies by Christians is still a thing.

The gospel breaks down cultural, racial, and geographical barriers. When Philip preaches the gospel in Samaria, the same Holy Spirit that worked in Jerusalem amongst the Jews shows up in power (vs. 6–7).

- People start getting set free from demonic bondage, many healings happen, and a revival breaks out!
- Great joy is felt in this Samaritan city (v. 8).

When we find ourselves “far from home” in a place outside our comfort zone surrounded by people who don't look like us, think like us, or believe like us, what do we do?

- We can assimilate and adopt their beliefs.
- We can isolate, judge, and grow bitter and self-righteous towards them.
- We can love them, get to know them, and share Christ with them out of obedience and love.

## SIMON THE MAGICIAN (ACTS 8:9–25)

In bringing the name of Jesus and the liberating power of His message to Samaria, Philip had invaded the stronghold of the occult.

- He meets a “magician” named Simon who had amazed people for a long time with his magic.
- Whether his dabbling in the occult centered on astrology or some other form of sorcery, whatever power people saw in him probably came from demonic sources.

However, as Philip begins to preach the gospel, the people start following Jesus and stop paying attention to Simon and his “magic.”

- Much to everyone's surprise, Simon also believes and is baptized (v. 13).
- Was Simon, whether a charlatan or sorcerer, genuinely converted? His further actions in this chapter reveal that the answer was a resounding “NO.”

Faith that is genuine is faith that continues throughout the duration of a person's life.

- Maybe Simon was caught up in the excitement of the moment and recognized Philip's miracles to be much greater than his own.
- He then followed Philip seeking to learn some new tricks and “purchase” power to continue living his life the way he wanted to.

Meanwhile, when the apostles heard what was happening in Samaria, they traveled there to be a part of what God was doing (v. 14).

- This is not lessening or cheapening Philip's ministry by any means. It simply tells us that Philip probably had no experience dealing with new converts or planting a church.
- His submission to leaders in the church and his humility is extremely noteworthy and admirable.

Verse 15 tells us that the Holy Spirit had not yet been given in Samaria, indicating that the baptism in v. 12 was water baptism for repentance in the name of Jesus (v. 16).

- Scholars for CENTURIES have debated this passage. Were the Samaritans not yet converted before the apostles came to them, or is receiving the Holy Spirit a second experience after salvation?

While there are arguments on both sides, it's important to note that this passage is “descriptive,” not necessarily “prescriptive.”

- The entire NT makes it clear that people who don't have the Holy Spirit aren't born again.
- At any rate, Philip wasn't equipped to teach on and pray for them to receive the Spirit in full measure.
- So Peter and John prayed for them (v. 17).

When Simon the Magician sees the miracles of Philip (and probably Peter and John too), he attempts to “purchase” this power (v. 19).

- Most likely, he saw the profit potential in this kind of power and wanted to continue as a magician in a new, more powerful kind of magic.
- Peter's response in v. 20 can be translated literally, “To hell with you and your money.” Simon's heart was wicked (vs. 21–23).

Simon's response (“pray... for me”) shows fear of judgment more than clear repentance. He wants relief from consequences but not necessarily a transformation of heart (v. 24).

- No one else can believe or repent for you. You must make a conscious decision of your will to repent of your sin and turn to God fully.
- We don't know what happened to Simon, but Peter and John returned to Jerusalem (v. 25).

What was Simon's sin? He wanted to “purchase” power from God to continue living his life the way he wanted to live it.

- He didn't want to change anything about his life or heart. He wanted just enough of Jesus to get what he could for personal gain.
- *Simony* is the word for the sin of buying or selling church offices or privileges, because it is done in the same spirit as this Simon.

### MODERN-DAY “SIMONY”: TRANSACTIONAL CHRISTIANITY

There are some who may serve, give, or attend with this unspoken expectation: “If I do this, God owes me blessing in life—in my family, my finances, and my reputation.”

- This treats obedience to God like a contract instead of a response of love.
- This is an attempt to use God to get what it is we really want.

### MODERN-DAY “SIMONY”: SEEKING A PLATFORM

Sometimes what people really want is influence through teaching, leading, and visibility.

- The underlying drive is not surrender to be used by God for His purposes, but rather the lust for recognition and approval.
- We may not be trying to “buy” a gift with money, but we're still trying to possess something that is never really ours to be possessed.

### MODERN-DAY “SIMONY”: BUILDING A REPUTATION

Often we're tempted to curate an image of being godly and righteous through things like a perfect family, consistent church attendance, moral positions, political activism, etc.

- But inwardly, we're driven by comparison, insecurity, pride, and self-righteousness.
- We're using the language and forms of faith to avoid living the actual life of faith.

### MODERN-DAY “SIMONY”: USING MONEY OR INFLUENCE TO CONTROL OR SHAPE OUTCOMES

- Money itself isn't evil, but having an ungodly attachment to it is spiritually dangerous.
- It's possible to have money and see that money as the thing that gives you access to whatever it is you want, even controlling or influencing people. Big donors often expect special treatment/access and decision-making power.

### MODERN-DAY “SIMONY”: BITTERNESS AND JEALOUSY

Peter tells Simon he's “poisoned by bitterness.” He had status and influence before the gospel showed up, then he watched everyday people receive something he can't control or replicate.

- That envy and wounded pride produces bitterness of heart. Someone who is critical and always spotting what's wrong is often unwilling to deal with their own interior life.

### GETTING OUR HEARTS RID OF MODERN-DAY SIMONY

- We have to name and reject our desire for transaction: what do we think God owes us?
- We must examine our motives, and not just our actions: what drives me to do what I do?
- We have to separate money and influence from spiritual clout: giving should be for God and to bless others, not to gain personal control or admiration.
- We must pursue spiritual formation over just having a platform: spiritual depth over visibility.

### WHAT DO YOU REALLY WANT?

- Do I want God, or do I just want what God can do for me?
- Do I want God's best for my life, or do I just want comfort, ease, pleasure, and convenience (even if I'm living in spiritual disobedience)?
- Do I truly want to see ALL people know Jesus and be saved, or only those who are like me and whom I'm comfortable around?
- “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.” – Proverbs 4:23 (NIV).
- God has big plans and an awesome will for you and for the renewal of all things. He's simply inviting you to be a part of it and surrender (not to try to control Him, use Him for personal gain, or stay in charge).
- Is surrender to God and His will what you want?