

## Acts 8:1-25: Would God Save the Worst of the Worst?

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### I. Introduction

Think of the most wicked person you can imagine, would God go to great lengths to save such an individual? Or do you think that there are some people who are too far gone? What if God was willing to save the worst of the worst, but their wicked behavior continued, would you think that they're not really saved or that they need someone to show them how to live life differently?

### II. Acts 8:1-25: Can the Most Wicked be Saved and If They Can be, How Do We Transform Them?

**8:1-3**, Saul (who would eventually become the apostle Paul) was watching the clothes of those killing Stephen (7:58). That whole incident of Stephen rebuking the Sanhedrin, accusing them of murdering Messiah and resisting the Holy Spirit, infuriated Saul. Not only did he approve of stoning Stephen, he led the persecution campaign against the church in Jerusalem. This caused all the Christians to scatter throughout the regions of Samaria and Judea, all except the apostles who remained in Jerusalem—they were likely protected from the authorities because the people held them in such high esteem (5:13). Saul's fury was so severe that he didn't just chase Christians in the streets; he dragged men *and women* out of their houses committing them to prison. Meanwhile, devout men buried Stephen. It's unclear whether these are Christians. They may be devout Jews who disagreed with the Sanhedrin's verdict. If so, this was a brave act because it was against the Mishnah to mourn the death of a condemned criminal. And this loud, public lamentation, which included wailing and beating the chest, basically painted the Sanhedrin as a kangaroo court and Stephen as innocent.

**8:4-8**, Saul's persecution had the opposite effect (as it always does when you persecute the Church, it grows). Instead of instilling fear in the Christians, it emboldened them to preach the Goodnews everywhere they went. One of these individuals was Philip; he was one of the seven deacons appointed by the apostles (6:5). He went to a city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. Notice: Philip's message was not a set of facts about Jesus; his message was Jesus. The Gospel, the Goodnews *is* Jesus, not information about Him. Jesus' desire is not to give you information about Himself, but to make you part of Him, thus becoming your personal guide in life. What was the Samaritans' response? They believed, especially when they saw the power of Christ work in Philip as he cast out demons and healed the paralyzed and lame. The end result: the entire city was filled with great joy! Why? The Lord had come to save the Samaritans too, to make them part of His Body, to give them His salvation power! Why was this so unique; who were the Samaritans and why did Stephen go there?

Jesus told His disciples that they would be witnesses to Him in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the end of the earth (1:8). Why did He single out the province of Samaria? Because Samaritans were considered second class citizens by Jews: In 722 B.C. God judged the Northern Kingdom of Israel through the Assyrians. They removed most of the Jews from the Northern Kingdom and replaced them with Gentiles from other nations. These Gentiles intermarried with the Jews that remained, resulting in the Samaritan race. These Jews were not just affected racially but religiously, i.e., these Gentiles brought with them their gods so that the Samaritans ended up worshipping the God of Israel along with many false gods (2 Kings 17:24-33).

And when the Jews from the Southern Kingdom were allowed back into the land by the Babylonians to rebuild the temple, the Samaritans wanted to help rebuild it, but the Jews wouldn't allow them (Ezra 4:1-4), not just because they weren't pure racially, but religiously, i.e., they worshipped the true God along with false gods. This began a great animosity between them and when Nehemiah was rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem, Sanballat, a Samaritan, opposed him (Nehemiah 6). Thus, full-blooded Jews hated Samaritans and considered them unclean/impure. They would not allow them to worship at the temple in Jerusalem. So the Samaritans built their own temple on Mt. Gerizim. The Samaritans also rejected the Prophets; they only accepted the five books of Moses, but not as Moses wrote them, i.e., they went through the five books and removed any mention of Jerusalem and replaced it with Gerizim. This animosity ran so deep that Jews who traveled from Galilee to Jerusalem preferred to go around Samaria even though it was a longer way. They didn't want to face the fierce opposition from the Samaritans (Luke 9:51-56). This is why Jesus singled out Samaria. He wanted everyone to know that the Samaritans were no longer to be considered half-breeds. He came to save them too, in fact, Jesus had previously signaled this during His ministry when He saved many Samaritans Himself, (John 4).

**8:9-13**, among the Samaritans was a man who was lost more than any of them. He wasn't just involved in idolatry; he in essence claimed to be God. His name was Simon, Simon the Sorcerer, i.e., he used to practice sorcery. He was so good at it that the entire city believed who he claimed to be: the great power of God. But when Philip came along, who really had the power of God, and they heard the things concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they turned from Simon to Jesus Christ. They accepted Him as Messiah and His Kingdom as the one to come to that both men and women were baptized. This act by the Samaritans was HUGE. For them to accept Jesus, a Jew, as Messiah and the future Kingdom as Jewish was amazing given the centuries of animosity between the Jews and Samaritans. That's not all, Simon, the one who previously thought he was the power of God, realized he wasn't and he too believed in Jesus and was baptized. He was so enamored by the miracles of Philip that he stuck close to Philip.

**8:14-25**, when the apostles get word that the Samaritans had believed in Christ, they send Peter and John. Why? Eventually the office of elder will be formed to govern local churches, but for now the apostles are the authority and set policy for the entire Church. And sending two apostles to authenticate the Samaritans' salvation would signal to everyone that the Lord came to save Samaritans too and they should no longer be treated as second class citizens by anyone. Instead, they are brothers and sisters in Christ. Additionally, Peter and John had to go lay hands on them so that they could receive the Holy Spirit, which as of yet they had not received. So they pray and lay hands on them and they received the Spirit, which was likely accompanied by speaking in tongues as in the other instances when the Holy Spirit baptized individuals (Acts 2, 10, 19). We also note that John's attitude towards the Samaritans has obviously changed (Luke 9:54).

But Simon was up to his old tricks. Once he saw that the Holy Spirit was given by the laying of hands, he wanted that power and offered Peter and John money for it. Peter rebuked him severely. He tells him that he and his money can perish for thinking that he could buy the gift of God. He needs to repent of his bitterness and wicked sin. He therefore needs to pray to God for forgiveness for this grave sin. Simon is concerned so he asks Peter to pray for him, that God will not do to him what Peter mentioned. We're not told the end of this story. Someone may have taken Simon under their wing and shown him how to live life differently, in a godly way instead of the sinful way he was used to. After this Peter and John return to Jerusalem but not before they bring many more Samaritans into Jesus' Kingdom.

**Was Simon saved or not? If he was, why didn't his sinful behavior change?** Because of his sinful behavior, some think Simon didn't truly believe in Christ; after all, he tried to buy the gift of the Holy Spirit! And they would see in Peter's words an implication that Simon is indeed not saved because Peter said that Simon and his money can "perish," Simon has "neither part nor portion in this matter," "his heart is not right in the sight of God," Simon needs to "repent" of his wickedness, and he's "poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity." It's true that Simon's actions and Peter's words point out that Simon is still bound by sin. But what is the only condition God ever places on eternal salvation? Faith! Belief, John 1:12; 3:15, 16, 18, 36; 5:24; 6:47, etc. Your sin before, during, or after you believe has nothing to do with your salvation. So the question is not, "Is Simon sinful?" The question is, "Did Simon believe in Jesus Christ?"

Not only did Simon believe in Jesus, he was baptized and received the Holy Spirit, 8:17—for those who might object, there's nothing in the context of the passage which suggests that Simon was not included in those Peter and John laid hands on. In fact, it implies the opposite, that Simon along with everyone else *who believed* and was baptized received the Holy Spirit. Thus, nothing Peter says about Simon is a comment on whether or not Simon is saved. But what about "You have neither part nor portion in this matter"? What matter is Peter talking about, Simon's eternal salvation or laying hands on people to receive the Holy Spirit? Peter is not saying, "You don't have part in eternal salvation." He's saying, "You will not take part in laying hands on people in order to impart to them the Holy Spirit, especially since you thought that this gift could be bought with money!" In fact, Simon's words in 8:24 are the beginnings of repentance if not outright repentance as Peter asked Simon to do in 8:22.

If Simon is saved, then why did his sinful behavior continue? How long has Simon lived in sin, particularly how long has he been enamored with having the power to do miracles? Presumably year and years, 8:11. How long will it take him to overcome this way of living? It's going to take some time. And how long has Simon been a Christian? We're not told how long it took the apostles to send Peter and John. It's unlikely, but let's assume it took a few months. Even in that case, Simon's only been a Christian for a few months. Not only will it take Simon time to overcome his sinful ways, he'll need someone to disciple him out of that life, just like Jesus disciplined Peter and John. In fact, couldn't we have questioned the apostle John's salvation based on his sinful reaction to the Samaritans when he wanted to kill them with fire from heaven, (Luke 9:51-56)? Instead of questioning John's salvation, Jesus rebuked him, as Peter rebuked Simon here.

Unless a Christian is disciplined as Jesus commanded (Matthew 28:19-20), especially when they first believe in Christ, then how can we expect their behavior to change? We call new Christians "baby believers." Well, what do we do with babies? Show them how to live life properly; that's what discipleship is about. Unless we show Christians how to live life with the Father and Son (John 17:3, 20-26) so that instead of living the old way, they live the new way in relationship with the Father and Son, their behavior won't change. This is why Simon thought he could buy the gift of the Spirit because he's still looking at life the old way. We're not told what ultimately happened with Simon, but someone may have disciplined him and shown him how to be a godly man. Regardless, he's still saved because he believed in Jesus.

### III. Conclusion

*But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, ...But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.*