

## Acts 8:1-25

### God's Unconventional Ways

Ryan Perz – February 9, 2020

You've probably either heard people say, or have said before, "Don't put God in a box." Often what that means is not limiting in your thinking what God can or cannot do. God does immeasurably more than we can ask or think.

The "Don't put God in a box" phrase also means that God often works in *unconventional ways*. God has a very mysterious side to his works. Dt 29:29 says God has a revealed will (The Word) of what we need to do; but he also has a hidden, revealed will that is secretive and unconventional, often unpredictable.

Acts 8 lays out some unconventional ways that God works—in people, places, and within "power structures".

#### **An unconventional person: Saul (1-3)**

- These three verses really concluded chapter 7.
- As the godly are mourning, Saul is mobilizing (v3). Suffering is a main sub-theme in Acts we need to keep an eye out for.
- Part of Paul's own testimony is that he used to persecute the Church (1 Tim 1:13).

Now if all we had is this limited picture, I'd say, "write this guy off. There is no hope; his heart is just so hard." That is the conventional way we typically look at people. But we need to leave a lot of room for God's unconventional ways of working.

Question: How would you pray for Saul, as described in v1-3? Picture your mom or dad has just been dragged off to jail. Or your best Christian friend, she was just slapped in the face—verbally and physically abused?

It would be tempting to treat the person as an enemy, pray imprecatory prayers like Ps 109:12? "Let there be none to extend kindness to him."

But God's unconventional way of working is to have patience, and even pity on enemies. The gospel reality is that we are all natural-born enemies of God (Rom 5:10).

Takeaway 1: Don't write anyone off. We need to leave a lot of room for God's unconventional work in unconventional people.

### **An unconventional place: Samaria (4-8)**

- Persecution scatters. It displaces. We've even seen that in recent years with ISIS and Islamic terrorism.
- But the one thing we can forget is that God can use the evil for good. He did that with Joseph in Egypt, Jesus at Calvary, and here in the persecuted church.
- Note that the apostles stayed back in Jerusalem (v, v1 &14)—that is actually a testimony of their boldness, not unwillingness to travel, or obey Jesus's marching orders.

The outbreak of persecution was used to broadcast preaching the gospel into Samaria. Opposition does not stop the spread of the Word (v25).

- It is an equally a bold move for Phillip to go to Samaria—it's an unconventional place.
- Now if we are tuned into the marching orders of Jesus (1:8), and listened carefully to Stephen's sermon in Acts 7, there is nothing unconventional about Phillip's trip to Samaria. It follows the trajectory of the book, it's mapped out. God's presence is not restricted to Jerusalem and the Temple.

Yet Samaria is a *place* and *people* looked down upon by Jesus's disciples.

- There was a deep divide between Jews and Samaritans. Not just racially, but in geography. Samaritans did not go to Jerusalem to worship, so they just built a rival temple on Mt. Garazim (destroyed second century B.C.)

To get a taste for the tensions, we turn to the Gospels

—Jn 4: Woman at the Well: Samaritan. Jews put Samaritans on the same level as Gentiles. Keep a distance and stay away. But Jesus went to an unconventional place and people.

—Lk 9:51-56: This account was also from Luke's pen. Jesus was not welcomed in Samaria, so James and John say, "Lord do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" (Lk 9:54).

- We can almost hear the disciples saying — "I'm not going back, no way!"

Question: What would you do with Samaria? Have you even been in a real unfriendly place, where the people are not welcoming, rude and cultures clash?

There have been two times in my life I recall saying out loud “I’ll never”. The first was about a decade ago. I said, “I’ll never go to a small rural town.” Guess where God put me in my first ministry assignment!

The other was about 20 years ago. My family was traveling to visit my Aunt who lives in the Florida Keys. Like Jesus had to go through Samaria in Jn 4, we had to pass through this place called Columba SC to rest and refuel. Let’s just say that the environment was so unpleasant that I said: “I’d never want to live here.” In the holy irony of God, I’m paying taxes to Richland County SC 20 years later. Be careful of your: “I’ll nevers”.

- Phillip is faithful. Notice he “proclaimed to them the kingdom and Christ” (v5, & 12).

I was given some of the most helpful preaching advice by a woman who taught a college English class I took. This woman had a husband who was a minister in a mainline liberal denomination. When he went to preach, she would always say to him, “Remember KISS.” It stood for Keep It Simple...and then added an unkind word for the final S that we don’t want our children repeating.

The KISS reminder can be helpful to us as we seek to engage outsiders and live on mission.

KISS—Keep It Simple Saints!

(Col 1:28) “<sup>28</sup> Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom”.

Evangelism is targeted conversation where we proclaim Christ to people who don’t know him.

- Finally, (v6-7) there is not only preaching, but works of mercy, healing, and deliverance.
- Now look at what God does in an unconventional place
  1. The Word is preached and received well (v6) “with one accord”.
  2. The city is flooded with joy! (v8)

Most of our decisions on where to live is based on what we think will bring *us* most happiness. *But the unconventional way God works is that we decide where God may want us, based on the joy it will bring to others!*

God may call some away from TRB to places like Samaria—unconventional and unlikely—all for the joy of those people. And that's exciting.

### **An unconventional power: Simon (9-25)**

- If there is one thread that ties everything together in this section it's power—Simon was a man who had it, seeks it, wants to keep it (e.g. v10)

The main character is Simon the Sorcerer. In church history he is branded the first heretic. The church historian Irenaus credited Simon to bringing the influence of gnosticism into the church. Some have debated if that is 100 percent accurate. He does leave a ripple effect. The word Simony, which is the practice of buying and selling of church positions (common in the medieval catholic church), is rooted in this episode.

There are two primary lessons

1. The powerful work of God—Samaritans
2. The powerful pull of sin—Simon

### Samaritan's conversion: the powerful work of God's Spirit

- Samaritans are those in Acts 2:39 described as "far off...whom the Lord our God calls for himself". Now, often, people get tripped up in what happens in vs. 15-16. God sovereignly delays the filling of the Spirit until the apostles lay hands on the Samaritans.
- As I said earlier, as we go through Acts, we need to see what is normative, and what is not. This is a non-normative act. The Spirit is the birthright of every believer, there is no two-stage experience that we need to seek.
- Why then the delay? The text does not give an explicit reason. It seems this act demonstrated a true unity where there once was divide. It was a bridge-the-gap action. Instead of folded arms, there is extended hands

on the new brothers and sisters in Christ. Jews and Samaritans needed to see that there is One People of God!

(Eph 2:14) <sup>14</sup>“For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.”

### Simon the Sorcerer: the powerful pull of sin

- (v10) Simon had a reputation of power. This remains the magnetic pull of his heart also.
- But from 13, on the surface, it appears that Simon is a man of change.
- But soon, his actions reveal his true heart (v18-19). The old man is creeping back in; the lust for power is still a strong pull. It's a bondage.
- Peter's rebuke in v23 exposes the heart.
- Gall of bitterness reflects Dt 29:18 – “Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, <sup>19</sup>one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, ‘I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.’”

*It describes lip service, but no heart change.*

There is a power at work we know called indwelling sin. We need to know ourselves well enough to know what sins really pull at our hearts. Let me add though, when scripture talks about indwelling sin and the battle, it never portrays believers in a losing battle, but it's just the opposite (Rom 6, Gal 5). There is victory!

(Rom 6:6) <sup>6</sup>“We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.”

Peter pulls no punches—Simon is an example of how powerful the pull of sin can be.

One thing is needed: Repentance (v22). *True belief always has true repentance.* Anything less is like the demonic belief described in James 2:19-20 which falls short of saving faith.

- The final focus is on the continued mission (v25). Even when there is hypocrisy and counterfeit disciples, the word continues to increase and multiply. God always overcomes opposition and obstacles.
- We hear of persecution worldwide, Christians in prison. God still advances the gospel.
- We hear of well known leaders defecting from the faith—God still advances the gospel.

### Conclusion

Where did Simon go wrong? There may be a slight clue in v 13.

Simon is amazed at something (power), not a person. He cares more about the gift than the Giver.

J.I. Packer asks a probing question in *Knowing God*.

“If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means he does not understand Christianity very well at all.” (J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* )

Simon did not understand what it really meant to be a Christian; it’s not the pursuit of power, but a person. Not a gift, but a Giver. It is captured in Phil 3:10 “that I may know him and the power his resurrection”.

What is most amazing to you? Grace? Knowing God as Father? Being in loving union with Christ?

May the Lord draw and keep our hearts in Christ.