

Gospel Triumph: Genuine Divine Power – Acts 8:1-25

On one of my first trips to Nepal, we went into a Buddhist monastery. The main room was dimly lit and filled with idols and candles, and I have to admit, when I walked in I felt very uncomfortable. I'm not an overly mystical guy, but this felt like a very dark place. It also felt very supernaturally charged by darkness. I told the two guys I was with that I wasn't interested in looking around and wanted to leave. I've not had that experience I ton in my life, but it was quite real.

We live in a time when many people in our Western and modern culture believe that the material world is all there is. Reality is made up of only what can be experienced through our 5 senses or what can be tested by science. Reality is a closed system or an immanent frame.

The Bible quite clearly and obviously opens the window to us to a world of spiritual powers beyond the material world. Now, we can certainly misunderstand this and read spiritual activity into everything negative that happens. Oh, Satan is trying to mess up our lunch today by having our food take extra-long to get to us.

Spiritual powers are quite real, but the clear message of Scripture is that the conflict between powers is not a level playing field. God's power, by the Spirit and advancing through the Gospel, is dominant and authoritative. We will see this repeatedly as we move through Acts and our passage for today puts the genuine power of God through the Spirit on display. So, in Acts 8:1-25 we will see **4 Marks of Divine Power that Foster Authentic Faith.**

1. Spreads through Persecution (vv. 1-8)

Last week we looked at Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin, which ultimately led to his martyrdom at their hands. Tucked away in the description of Stephen's stoning is this comment in 7:58. The fact that they laid their garments at his feet indicates that he was some sort of leader in the arrest and persecution of Stephen. Perhaps he was a part of this synagogue. Regardless, notice how chapter 8 begins in verses 1-3.

The Sanhedrin and Saul are so upset over Stephen's words and so inflamed by his death that they take the battle to the rest of the Christians. In verse 3 we find Saul going house to house, which is the same method of discipleship used by the Apostles in 5:42. Verse 1 points out that because of this persecution the Christians

begin to scatter out to Judea and Samaria. This is probably a good place to remind you of the instructions that Jesus gave in Acts 1:8. It's amazing that God's sovereign hand even uses events like this persecution to move his Gospel forward. So what happens as these believers spread out into Judea and Samaria? Look at verse 4. They do exactly what they are called to do. They preach the gospel. Notice verse 5.

We've obviously met Philip before in chapter 6. He was one of the seven chosen to take care of the widows and he's mentioned right after Stephen. He leaves Jerusalem and goes to Samaria and proclaims Jesus as Messiah.

We read about the Samaritans in the Gospels, and we find out that Jews and Samaritans really didn't like each other. The Samaritans were half Jews who lived around the former capital of the Northern Kingdom. They had their own Temple at Mt. Gerizim. Jesus speaks with a Samaritan woman at a well in John 4 and listen to what she says to Him. John 4:9. It's quite a departure from cultural norms for Christians to head to Samaria but they do while preaching the Christ. Watch what happens. Look at verses 6-7. Philip follows the pattern of the Apostles and Stephen here. He preaches Christ and God allows signs and miracles to accompany him to confirm God's genuine power and the message of the Gospel.

Make note of the language in verse 6 that the crowds paid attention to Philip. That won't be the last time you see that in this passage. Look at the response in verse 8. This is clearly a major transition in the book of Acts as the Gospel, accompanied by God's power, comes to the Samaritans. And it comes through persecution. The Jewish leaders thought they could crush the Jesus movement once and for all, but they only succeeded in spreading it out so others could hear and believe. Let's move on to our second mark of God's power.

2. Sovereign over Darkness (vv. 9-13)

As the people of Samaria are hearing the Gospel and seeing Philip performing miracles, we are introduced to a major character in this section of Acts. Look at verse 9. Now, practicing magic is not what we see with sleight of hand tricks and making the bunny appear out of a hat. Simon was tapping into the supernatural powers of darkness and performing sorcery. The people were amazed by what he did, and Simon thought pretty highly of himself as well.

Notice what verses 10-11 say about the people. Twice we see the same language we saw in verse 6 regarding how the people responded to Philip and the Gospel.

What you have here is a group of people who were enthralled with the powers of darkness and were to some extent under the sway of evil. They genuinely believed Simon to be a representative of God, and they were held captive to his authority and power. But we already saw that when the gospel was preached, and signs were done by Philip that they gave him their attention. But their interest in the gospel didn't stop there. Look at verse 12.

Philip is proclaiming the kingdom of God. In other words, he's preaching about the arrival of God's power and authority through Jesus Christ. This breaks the hold that darkness has on them. For the moment, it even seems to have broken the hold that darkness had over Simon. Look at verse 13.

In Acts we have multiple examples of the gospel coming into conflict with evil and the gospel always prevails. There's a reason that Paul says this in Romans 1:16. God exercises His Divine power through the preaching of the Gospel and that power brings about real change in people. And this is our third mark.

3. Spiritually Transforms (vv. 14-24)

We just saw many of the people believe and get baptized, but what has been the defining mark of those who trust Christ so far in Acts? They receive the Holy Spirit. Well, we have an interesting situation here. Look at verses 14-16.

When you read the book of Acts you have to keep in mind that this is a transitional time in the church. There's often no set pattern early in this book. Most likely the Samaritans had to wait for the Apostles to receive the gift of the Spirit so that it would authenticate their faith and the movement of the Gospel outside of Jerusalem. This was a big deal, and they needed assurance that it was a real movement of God's power. We find a similar thing happening later with Gentiles. But as the Apostles come these new believers receive the Spirit and are changed. Look at verse 17.

And one of the ways we know that God's power brings about spiritual transformation is by the lack of transformation that occurs in Simon. While it says earlier that he believed and was baptized, verse 13 hints that maybe his faith is

more of a curiosity regarding the miracles, rather than a transforming faith in the Gospel. We know that because of what comes next. Look at verses 18-19.

Notice his interest is not in partaking of the Spirit. He wants the power to be able to distribute the Spirit. He has spent his life fascinated by sorcery and that continues. He wants to keep being a great man and sees the power of God as the pathway to keep that up. He doesn't want to submit to God's power and he hasn't experienced the life change and perspective change that the gospel brings. We know he hasn't changed because of what Peter says to him. Look at verses 20-21.

Peter pronounces a curse on him and his money and also points out that Simon doesn't have a part in this. He's referring to the Gospel and salvation here. One of the great realities of the message of the Gospel is that humbly believing and submitting to the truth of the Gospel brings about a change. It's not a change that money can buy or works can earn because it's a change that comes from experiencing God's power by His grace.

When you see that you are a sinner and cannot save yourself from your own sin, and then you see that God has graciously sent His Son to die in your place to take the penalty for your sin, and you see that through this action Jesus won the victory over sin and death, it fundamentally shifts the ground beneath your feet. Once you really and truly see the Gospel and believe it, you cannot go back. It changes you. Listen to Isaiah 55:1-7.

Simon hasn't experienced this change. So Peter tells him what he must do. Look at verses 22-23. Simon hasn't changed but is caught in idolatry and evil. He needs to repent. He has spent his life pursuing false power through false gods and led others to do the same. This poisonous root must be extracted, and it can only happen by God's power through the Gospel of grace.

Does Simon repent? It's sort of left open in the story, but it doesn't appear so. Look at verse 24. He appears to just want to avoid the consequences but also doesn't truly change.

Simon's story confirms to us the heart level change that will take place in a believer. Claiming belief and showing interest in the things of Christ cannot substitute for a fundamentally fresh perspective that comes by the Spirit's power. Let's move to our last mark.

4. Strengthens Disciples (vv. 25)

Look with me at verse 25. The Apostles had clearly come to Samaria to ensure that these believers received the gift of the Holy Spirit. So who are they speaking to in verse 25? Believers. This verse indicates to us that they continued to teach and preach the Word of God to strengthen these new followers of Christ.

This is the pattern set for us in the Great Commission in Matthew 28 and it's what we see in the rest of Acts. People go into an area and preach the gospel, and people are saved and churches spring up and then they go back into the area later to confirm the faith of those believers and to give further instruction. God's power doesn't depart after one is saved. God's power continues to build up and strengthen believers toward maturity.

And how do we go about continually connecting our church to the power of God? How do we remain plugged in? Well, the method we see here hasn't changed. It's through the grace filled message of the Gospel. The life, death, resurrection, and enthronement of Jesus Christ continually empowers us.

I'll close with the Apostle Paul's understanding of how this works from 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. Let's pray.

Sermon Reflection Questions – 2/2/25

- Have you ever had an encounter with supernatural darkness or evil that you would be willing to share?
- What are some of the results of a belief system that sees the material world as all there is? How do you see this in our culture today?
- How do we find a balance between seeing spiritual activity behind every event and ignoring the possibility of spiritual activity?
- What are other examples of God's sovereignty using difficulty to accomplish His purposes?
- Can you share a situation from your life that involves a difficult situation ultimately bringing about good in God's sovereignty?
- What role do signs and miracles play in the book of Acts?
- What do you think it means in Romans 1:16 that the gospel is the power of God?
- How would you explain the delay the Samaritans experienced in receiving the Holy Spirit?
- Do you think Simon truly was saved? Why or why not? Defend your answer from the text.

- What pattern is set out in 8:25? Where else in Scripture do we see this pattern?