

The Gospel Is for Everyone

LESSON 6

Topic

The gospel

Theme

The gospel has no boundaries.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will trust the power of the gospel to reach everyone, even those who seem the least likely to be saved.

Materials

• Resources 1, 2, and 8

▶ Scripture Focus

Acts 8:4–9:31

Summary

Lesson 6 focuses attention on two men. Philip's work in Samaria and with the Ethiopian illustrates how the gospel of grace transcends geographical and ethnic boundaries. The conversion of Saul shows the power of the gospel to overcome misguided and false religious boundaries.

Outline

I. Philip's Ministry (8:4–40)

- A. Philip ministry to the hated (8:4–25)
- B. Philip's ministry to the heathen (8:26–40)

II. Saul's Conversion (9:1–31)

- A. Damascus Road conversion experience (9:1–9)
- B. Saul's first contact with believers (9:10–19a)
- C. Saul's early ministry (9:19b–22)
- D. Saul's escape from Damascus (9:23–25)
- E. Saul's reception in Jerusalem (9:26–31)

Memory Verses

"But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ" (Acts 9:22).

GETTING STARTED

Loyalty Change?

ASK: What deep loyalties to products, brands, or sports teams do you have? (Q1)

ASK: What might it take for you to change your loyalties? (Q2)

Sometimes we see the lost as unreachable. We wrongly conclude they are loyal to the world and would never become a believer.

This lesson helps us realize that the gospel knows no boundaries. Even the person who most strongly opposes God and Christianity is not beyond the power of the gospel.

Salvation Testimonies

Invite your learners to share the circumstances of their salvation. As each one shares, pause for a moment and praise God that He offers His salvation to all who will believe.

ASK: How unlikely was it that you would be saved?

Invite your learners to explain why they might think they were most unlikely to hear or respond to God's offer of salvation. As they share, rejoice in God's grace to them.

Share with your learners that this lesson will look at the gospel's powerful ministry to seemingly hard-to-reach or perhaps even *unsavable* people.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

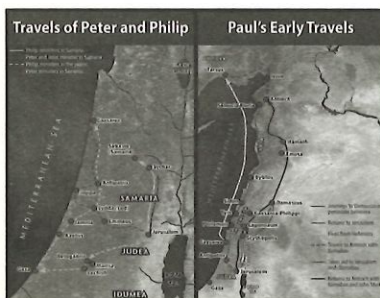
I. Philip's Ministry (Acts 8:4–40)

A. Philip's ministry to the hated (8:4–25)

Philip, like Stephen, was a Hellenistic Jew. He, along with six others, oversaw the distribution of food (6:5). Apparently he traveled north from Jerusalem into Samaria to preach the gospel. This northward route was similar to the one Jesus used when He traveled to Samaria (John 4).

MAP: Display resource 8. Point out the routes of Philip and Peter as you cover them in the first half of this lesson.

The Jews considered Samaria and the Samaritans unclean. First, the Samaritans were neither Jew nor Gentile. They descended from the northern tribes of Israel, who had fallen into Assyrian captivity in 722 BC. Then some of the Jews who remained in the land intermarried with the indigenous Canaanite population. The offspring of the Jewish and Canaanite families were called Samaritans. The Jews viewed the Samaritans as religious half-breeds and compromisers. They hated the Samaritans so much that they wouldn't even travel through Samaria.



ASK: If you lived in Samaria at that time, how do you think you would have been affected by the Jews' rejection? (Q3)

Philip, like Christ, viewed the Samaritans as sinners in need of the gospel. He proclaimed the true Messiah to them (Acts 8:5–8). The Samaritans had great joy as a result of trusting in Christ as their Savior.

READ: Acts 8:8. **ASK:** Why do those who are downtrodden and rejected often respond so joyfully to the gospel? (Q4) *The gospel assures them that they are loved by God and that they are valuable to Him. They find acceptance in the gospel.*

In Samaria was a man named Simon (8:9). He practiced magic, or sorcery. He promoted himself and accepted the praise of men. They associated him with God, but the reference to magic here refers to demonic-induced power (8:10). Simon had a counterfeit power that drew people away from the truth about God and His servants.

The Samaritans believed Philip's message; then they were baptized (8:12). The record reiterates that personal belief in Christ precedes baptism. Simon the Sorcerer also made a profession of faith (8:13). But Luke's use of the pronoun *himself* to describe Simon and the inclusion about Simon's preoccupation with the miracles and wonders tip the reader that Simon's conversion to Christ was not genuine. He was joining the crowd out of convenience. He lacked true faith as is obvious later in the passage.

After Peter and John arrived in Samaria, the Holy Spirit descended on the Samaritan believers (8:14, 15). The Samaritan believers received the Holy Spirit as Peter and John prayed for them and *laid their hands on them*. Normally Spirit baptism occurs at conversion (1 Cor. 6:11, 19; 2 Cor. 1:21, 22). So why the difference here? Luke indicated that the Samaritans' reception of the Spirit was unusual (Acts 8:16). The words *yet* and *only* suggest that something out of the ordinary had occurred. The delay of the coming of the Spirit was purposeful. God provided the Samaritans with their own Pentecost-type experience to demonstrate their spiritual equality with Jewish believers. God did not desire a Samaritan church to develop apart from the Jerusalem church. Christ was building just one body of believers that included both the Jews and the hated Samaritans. This was radical for the first-century believers.

ASK: How should we as believers be affected by the fact that the Holy Spirit is nondiscriminatory? (Q5) *We should be as equally nondiscriminatory. We should know no restrictions when it comes to sharing the gospel and inviting believers to become a part of our local churches.*

Simon the sorcerer wanted to know how he might manipulate the Spirit to further his own greed (8:18, 19). He was self-seeking. His profession was a sham to obtain additional status among the people. Peter severely reprimanded Simon, using the words *perish*, *wickedness*, *gall of bitterness*, and *bond of iniquity* to indicate Simon was an unbeliever (8:20–23). Peter's statement, *Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter* is similar to Old Testament phraseology referring to membership, sharing in an inheritance, and the like (e.g., Deut. 12:12; 14:27). Peter's

denial of this type of membership to Simon is another indicator that Simon was not a believer. Simon had only surface faith. Jesus Himself attached little value to superficial faith placed in miracles (John 2:23, 24).

ASK: Why was it important for Peter to adamantly rebuke Simon? (Q6)
Because Simon would misrepresent the church and its mission.

Peter's rebuke of Simon might make us think Peter didn't care for Simon or that he wished he would just go away. But Simon needed rebuked if he was ever going to understand what it meant to truly believe in Christ for salvation. Peter's rebuke was the best way to show Simon he was still lost in his sins and in need of faith in Christ.

B. Philip's ministry to the heathen (8:26–40)

In the meantime, God continued to send His ministers to share the gospel with Gentiles. Luke recorded the connection between Philip and the Ethiopian to illustrate this spread of the gospel even to Gentiles. Luke describes the eunuch as an important official, a treasurer, in the court of Candace (8:27). The facts that the eunuch rode in a chariot, owned a copy of the Isaiah scrolls, and visited Jerusalem suggest that this man commanded both wealth and importance. Yet the Jews would have considered him a heathen.

Unlike Simon, the eunuch had a true spiritual thirst. Philip used Isaiah 53:7 and 8 as a springboard for explaining the death and resurrection of Christ. The eunuch genuinely trusted in Christ and was baptized by Philip. Tradition suggests that the eunuch returned to Africa and served as an early missionary.

After Philip completed his ministry to the eunuch, the Spirit of God snatched him away to another location. Philip preached in cities till he came to Caesarea in Samaria (8:39, 40).

ASK: What did Philip's ministry to the hated and the heathen suggest about the power of the gospel? (Q7) *The gospel knows no limits.*

ASK: What does Philip's ministry suggest about the believer's responsibility to witness to different people? (Q8) *We should be ready to witness to whomever God brings across our path, and we should be willing to go to wherever God wants us to go to reach the lost.*

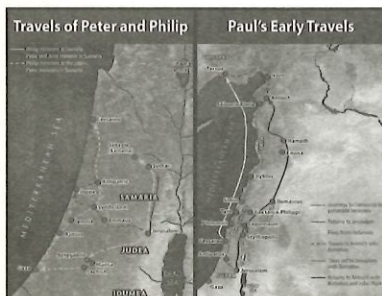
II. Saul's Conversion (Acts 9:1–31)

Luke next recorded Saul's salvation experience. One cannot overestimate the significance of his conversion to Christianity. The comparison between the eunuch and Saul is interesting. As many commentators have observed, the eunuch was converted in a chariot, while Saul was converted in the dust.

A. Damascus Road conversion experience (9:1–9)

MAP: Display resource 8. Point out Paul's routes as you cover them.

The adverb *yet* in Acts 9:1 refers the reader to Acts 8:3 and indicates that Saul



had continued ravaging the church. Saul had authority from the high priest, a Sadducee, giving him, a Pharisee, unilateral power to arrest Jesus' disciples. Normally the high priest would not exercise control over the synagogues. Perhaps in this case, the Pharisees worked through the high priest to gain extradition of believers in the Damascus area. Apparently the Sadducees and Pharisees' common hatred for Jesus and His disciples overshadowed their theological differences.

The city of Damascus was 130–150 miles northeast of Jerusalem. That believers lived hundreds of miles away from Jerusalem illustrates the dispersion of believers and the spread of the gospel after the stoning of Stephen and the ramping up of the persecution of believers. Paul wanted to make the extended trip to try to stop the gospel from scattering even further.

Saul referred to Christians as people of *this way* (9:2). The *way* designated Christianity in other passages to (19:9, 23; 22:4). The term apparently indicated a path or way of life. Perhaps it also came from Jesus' own teaching that He alone is the way (John 14:6; Matt. 7:14). So while Saul traveled on the road to Damascus to persecute the people of the *way*, he both heard and saw the Way, the risen Christ (Acts 9:17, 27). This vision of Christ completely blinded and overwhelmed him (9:3–7). In Acts 22:6 Luke mentioned that the vision occurred around noontime. The light of Jesus' presence must have been brilliant to eclipse the sunlight and blind Saul.

Jesus asked, *Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?* (9:4). Notice the union between the church and Jesus. Persecuting the church was the same as persecuting Christ. Jesus' next statement indicates that Saul's conscience was bothering him. Jesus said it was hard for Saul to *kick against the pricks* (9:5). A *prick* is a stick used to prod animals along. Apparently the Spirit had been working in Saul's heart since the time of Stephen's martyr. Perhaps he questioned if he was actually on God's side. Saul, trembling and astonished, asked the Lord what he should do (9:6). With that question Saul stopped kicking against the goad and submitted to the Lord. The Lord told Saul to go into the city where he would find out what he was to do. Saul, the greatest threat thus far to Christianity, was then led by hand into Damascus (9:8). The raging, persecuting zealot had been reduced to a broken, blinded man in a moment of time. The fact that Saul did not eat or drink for three days indicates his humility and repentance (9:9).

ASK: What does Saul's conversion suggest about the power of the gospel? (Q9) *No one, even a religious zealot who hates Christianity, is beyond the gospel.*

ASK: What does his conversion suggest about the believer's responsibility to witness to people that seem highly unlikely to trust in Christ? (Q10) *How likely a person is to trust in Christ is not a barometer for whether or not a believer should witness to the person. The power of the gospel makes salvation possible for all people.*

B. Saul's first contact with believers (9:10–19a)

READ: Acts 9:10–14. **ASK:** What would cause Ananias to question God? (Q11) *His doubt that Saul could be saved.*

The Lord assured Ananias that Saul had indeed trusted in Him for salvation. Saul was His chosen vessel to witness before Gentiles, kings, and the Jews and to suffer for God's sake (9:15, 16). Indeed, Paul did appear before Felix (Acts 24:1–23), Festus (24:27–25:12), Herod Agrippa II (25:13–26:32), and possibly even Nero (25:11).

ASK: How do you think Jesus' details of His plans for Saul affected Ananias's understanding of the power of the gospel? (Q12) *He would have had no doubt that anyone could be saved. Saul had to be the least likely person to trust Christ in that part of the world.*

Ananias immediately referred to Saul, whom he had feared, as *brother Saul* (9:17). The disciples also immediately received Saul into their fellowship (9:19). The terms *saints*, *brother*, and *disciples* reflect an early understanding of the position and the unity of believers. The believers accepted Saul into the fellowship as an equal brother.

C. Saul's early ministry (9:19b–22)

As Saul became part of the ministry at Damascus, he immediately began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogue (9:20). Specifically, Saul declared Jesus as the *Son of God*, indicating he recognized the deity of Jesus. Those who heard Saul preach were amazed (9:21). They had a hard time believing Saul was joining those he once planned to hunt down and kill.

D. Saul's escape from Damascus (9:23–25)

In Damascus, the Jewish leaders quickly tired of Saul and the gospel. They didn't want to hear it. Unable to refute his logic, the exasperated Jews conspired to murder him (9:23). His disciples heard of the plot and lowered him through the window, since the Jews were watching the city gates (9:24, 25).

ASK: How would you describe the level of devotion Saul had in sharing the gospel and the truth about Jesus? (Q13) *He was serious and single minded.*

E. Saul's reception in Jerusalem (9:26–31)

Saul eventually returned to Jerusalem. There the disciples questioned the nature of his conversion (9:26). Their fear and doubt probably resulted from their lack of direct contact with Saul for over three years. According to Galatians 1:18, Saul returned to Jerusalem in the third year after his conversion to meet with the apostles. In Galatians, Paul stressed that he minimized his contact with the Jerusalem apostles to stress that he himself was a true apostle. Paul was neither subordinate nor inferior to any of the other apostles. In Acts, Luke showed that the apostles eventually accepted Saul and that they fully supported his apostolic ministry.

Barnabas took Saul to the apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 9:27). Saul recounted that he had seen and spoken with the Lord and that he had immediately begun witnessing of the resurrected Christ. This experience formed the basis of Saul's apostleship. A true apostle had to have a personal commission from the resurrected Christ and a uniquely empowered ministry.

Saul was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem (9:28). The apostles

At this point, Luke may have left a gap in the story of Paul's life. In Galatians Paul wrote that he had traveled southeast of Damascus to Arabia. Many scholars believe this trip occurred either between verses 21 and 22 or verses 22 and 23 of Acts 9. The Scriptures are not clear on why Paul went to Arabia.

may have accepted Saul into the apostolic circle even though he had not yet started his full apostolic ministry to the Gentiles.

ASK: Saul would have ministered alongside friends and family members of Stephen. What does their reception of Saul illustrate about the gospel? (Q14)
The gospel heals deep hurts and open the way for unfathomable forgiveness.

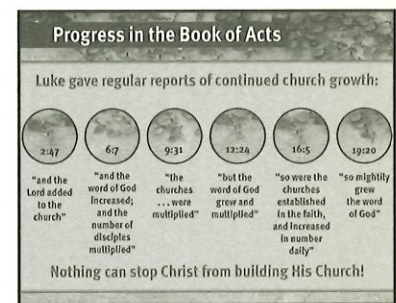
Saul, like Stephen had done, debated with the Hellenistic Jews (9:29). When they planned to kill him, the disciples escorted him to Caesarea (9:29, 30). Saul then traveled to Tarsus, his birthplace (9:30). He later reflected in Acts 22:17–21 that he had left Jerusalem as a result of a vision from Jesus so that he could start his ministry to the Gentiles.

Saul remained in the province of Cilicia about six years until Barnabas contacted him and took him to Antioch (11:19–26). Many scholars refer to these years as silent years, since we know little about Saul during that time. Perhaps some of the events described in 2 Corinthians 11:24–27 and 12:1–9 occurred then.

Meanwhile, the churches in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed a brief rest. They were edified and were walking in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:31).

RESOURCE: Display resource 2 to review the markers in the book of Acts that show nothing could stop Christ from building His church.

Jesus transformed Saul, who at one time was the greatest threat to the infant church, into a man with a holy calling. The church was then poised to reach the Gentile world.



MAKING IT PERSONAL

Unsavable People

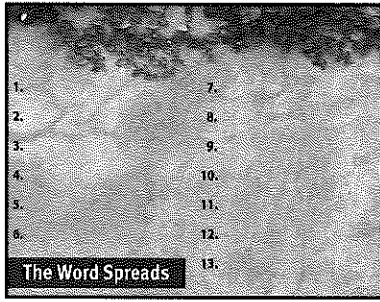
ASK: Who in our community, either groups or individuals, would seem unreachable? (Q15)

ASK: Why do these groups or individuals seem unlikely to ever be saved? (Q16)

ASK: What could we do as a church to make sure we are reaching even these people in our community? (Q17)

Personal Response

Ask your learners to think about their need to witness to those who seem outside the provision or power of the gospel. Then have them write down what they sense God would have them do to fulfill that need. Encourage them to make this response as practical as possible, beginning with any need for forgiveness and



with a commitment to pray for those on their list. Encourage them to make a plan to actually seek opportunities to witness to those on their list. (Q18)

Review Resource

Use resource 1 to review the response for this lesson: Set no limits on the gospel.