

*You Can't Buy this Power*

**Acts 8:4-25**

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I've mentioned my mentor and friend Bob Tuttle. He's retired now, but he taught in several seminaries and regularly traveled across the U.S. and around the world, preaching and lecturing. He has many stories of conversations on airplanes. One of his airplane stories is about a trip he and his father were taking to New Zealand. As they were settling into their seats, a young man sat next to Bob. He was a landscape architect for a large West Coast Firm. After some small talk, he asked Bob what he did for a living.

"I'm a minister," he replied.

The young man quickly said that he was an atheist. Bob asked, "How does a man who gets to work with nature's beauty as a landscape architect get to be an atheist?"

"Just lucky, I guess."

Bob's father whispered, "Son, this one's going to be tough."

Then the man asked, "So, why would anyone want to be a minister?"

Bob said, "Let me ask you another question. If you could know for certain that there really is a God who loves and cares for you and who makes a power available to sustain you in your life, would you be interested?"

"You bet," he said.

"That's why I'm a minister. I want to help people like you come to know that there really is a God who loves and cares about you and who makes a power available to sustain you in your life."

The man said, "Tell me more." Since the man couldn't run far and they were on a long transcontinental flight, that's just what Bob did (Bob Tuttle, *Can We Talk?* 81-84; *Sanctity Without Starch* 8-9).

What would you give for the power of God? What would you sacrifice, how much would you pay, what would you offer to know God's power working in and through you and sustaining you in your life? Whatever you'd give, it's not enough. You can't buy this power. God's

power isn't for sale. The power of God in the Holy Spirit is a gift. God in grace makes power available to us that not only sustains us but enables us to minister, to be and do all that God calls us to.

Acts 8 opens with the persecution of the church that began with the killing of Stephen. The apostles stayed in Jerusalem while most of the other believers scattered like seeds across Judea and Samaria. "Forced to leave home base, the Christians all became missionaries" (v 4, *The Message*).

Persecution moved the church out into the world from Jerusalem. Popularity and prestige tend to make the church complacent, self-satisfied, and powerless. Opposition and threats can motivate us to rely on God and get on the front lines of God's calling.

My brother tells about when he was young out on the farm. Steve is nine years older than me, and this happened before I was born. Charlie Beard was a neighbor of my family's. Steve says Charlie was one of those men who was always old. One Fourth of July, the neighbors had gathered. Several of the men were cranking ice cream freezers. Charlie was old enough not to take a turn at the freezer, so he was sitting and visiting with people. Steve was playing with firecrackers and accidentally dropped a lit one under Charlie's chair. Everyone was amazed at how fast that old man could move as he jumped up and away from the firecracker under his chair.

Persecution was like a firecracker dropped in the middle of the Jerusalem church. The believers scattered from there and told the good news of Jesus wherever they went. What does it take to motivate us, to get us moving out with the gospel where God wants us to go?

Philip, like Stephen, was one of the seven helpers the apostles had appointed. When he left Jerusalem, he went to a city in Samaria and proclaimed Jesus the Messiah there. Not only did people hear what Philip said, but they also saw what he did—miraculous signs, casting out demons, healing the sick. They paid close attention to what he said. They were in one accord—something about the gospel draws people together. There was great joy in that city.

There was a man named Simon the Magician who lived in this Samaritan city. He amazed people. He boasted that he was someone great. Everyone paid attention to him and called him "The Great Power"—hinting

that he was some kind of divine power or being. The people had been following Simon in amazement.

But when they heard Philip preaching the good news of God's kingdom and the name of Jesus Christ, they were not just amazed, but they believed and were baptized—men and women alike. Simon himself believed and was baptized. This one who had been amazing people with his tricks, now is amazed by the power of God. The one that everybody had been following now starts following Philip around. Simon was attracted by the power of this new faith. But his view of the gospel and its power was too narrow and he misunderstood the nature of this power.

Meanwhile, the apostles in Jerusalem heard that the Samaritans had accepted God's word. So they sent Peter and John to Samaria. The last time they had gone through there, John and his brother James had wanted to call down fire from heaven and destroy a Samaritan village that refused to welcome Jesus (Luke 9:51-55). Samaria was a region north of Judah and south of Galilee. Traditional Jews saw Samaritans as racially impure people who were also religious heretics, and political traitors (Robert Wall, *Acts, The New Interpreter's Bible*). For these disciples to go to Samaria was a little like a modern day Jew going across the border to minister to Palestinians. Or a Christian going from South Korea to minister in North Korea.

But Peter and John had also heard Jesus tell a story where a Samaritan was the hero (Lk 10:30-37). They remembered Jesus healing ten lepers. Only one returned to thank Jesus—and that one was a Samaritan (Lk 17:11-19). They remembered going through Samaria with Jesus and stopping at a town well. The disciples went into town to get lunch and when they returned found Jesus talking with a Samaritan woman. She soon ran into town and then a crowd from the town came out to meet Jesus (John 4:1-42). Just before Jesus ascended to heaven, he told the disciples, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea *and Samaria*, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Maybe they didn't know what to make of that when he first said it, but now they're doing it. The apostles' prejudice is breaking down. They're going to see for themselves that God includes others in his kingdom and purposes.

When Peter and John get to Samaria, they pray for the people who have believed through Philip's ministry. They pray for them to receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had not yet come in power upon these Samaritans, equipping them for ministry and service. They'd been baptized in the name of Jesus. But now their experience is complete, because no one can really be in Jesus and be part of the Christian community without the Holy Spirit. As Peter and John placed their hands on them and prayed, the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit.

We might wonder why these Samaritans had this two-stage experience. Was it to maintain a connection with the apostles and the Jerusalem church? Was it to convince the apostles that God was truly including the Samaritans in his purpose and ministry? Were the Samaritans simply an exception to the rule that people generally receive the Holy Spirit at conversion?

Probably there's something to each of those options. The important thing to remember is that the Holy Spirit is essential for Christian life and ministry, whatever pattern we see for receiving the Spirit. The Spirit once given at Pentecost is leading the church farther out into the world. This experience in Samaria is a major breakthrough for the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit among a new group of people.

Enter Simon the Sorcerer again. When he sees people receiving the Holy Spirit as Peter and John lay hands on them, he wants to add this ability to his bag of tricks. He offers the apostles money and says, "Let me do this too!"

Peter says, "May your money perish with you." Several translators and commentators say that Peter's words are literally, "To hell with you and your money!" He tells Simon that he has no part in this ministry because his heart is not right with God. He calls Simon to repent of this wickedness and pray for the Lord to forgive him for thinking such a thing. Simon is full of bitterness and he's captured by sin.

Simon begs the apostles to pray for him so that what Peter said won't happen to him. Luke doesn't tell us what Simon's motive was or whether he truly repented. But we can learn some things from his story.

The fact that Simon thought he could buy God's gift and then administer it to just anyone without mention of faith or repentance shows how little he understood God's gifts. New believers need instruction. We need to be trained and taught about who God is and what God does, what faith is, and what it means for us to believe and live in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And what about evangelism and outreach that includes even Samaritans but excludes someone like Simon who doesn't fit the lifestyle and beliefs of the community of the Spirit? The church was fighting for its life. But they didn't reduce their witness to the least common denominator. They defined themselves and their faith by rebuking those like Simon who wouldn't change their pagan lifestyles and attitudes. The church doesn't baptize the status quo. The church doesn't give mushy affirmation: "I don't always agree with Simon, but he draws a crowd and he does a lot of good." The church demands repentance (Will Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation Commentary*).

Luke emphasizes that the Holy Spirit is God's gift. Trying to buy God's gracious gift is a serious matter. That's not how God's kingdom works. And, God's Spirit isn't some power that magicians like Simon can call and control as they will. Trying to control God's gifts shows a deficient faith. God's Spirit and the Spirit's manifestations are gifts of God—surprising, undeserved, uncontrollable gifts.

This story of the Samaritans was part of how I was introduced to the gift of God's Spirit in my life. A bunch of people were at our house one evening when I was in junior high. A man read this story to me. He affirmed what God had already done in my life in conversion and then he told me that God had more for me. He talked about being filled with the Holy Spirit. That was the night I first asked God to fill me with his Spirit and I started a new phase in the adventure of being a Christian.

Jim Buskirk is another mentor of mine. He's also retired. I must be getting old—so many of my mentors and teachers have retired. The first time I heard Dr. Buskirk preach, he used this text from Acts 8. His sermon was, "Where Do You Live?" Do you live in Samaria before Philip came proclaiming Jesus? Have you responded in faith to the good news? Do you

live in Samaria after Philip but before Peter and John and the coming of the Holy Spirit? Are you trying to follow Jesus just with your own strength and smarts? Or are you relying on the power God gives in the Holy Spirit? Do you live in Samaria after the Holy Spirit came upon the believers? Which stage of this story describes your experience?

Now, I believe the New Testament teaches that we receive the Holy Spirit when we put our faith in Jesus and we're converted. But I also believe that God has more for us than a single experience. The old Methodists talked about a "second work of grace." I like to talk about a *continuous* work of grace. The Spirit of God claims more and more of our love, devotion, and commitment. As we continue to open ourselves to God and grow in grace, there may be numerous outpourings of the Holy Spirit in our lives. God gives the power and gifts we need to do the tasks that we face.

There's an illustration that's been going around for years. A science teacher brought a big jar into the classroom and filled it with large rocks. The teacher asked if the jar was full. The class said, "Yes, it's full." Then the teacher poured gravel into the cracks and asked again if it was full. "Yes, this time it's full." Then the teacher poured in sand and again asked if the jar was full. The students said, "You tell us!" Then the teacher poured in water.

Sometimes that's used to illustrate priorities: put the big rocks in first. But I want to apply it in a different way. God wants to fill us and fill us with the Holy Spirit, with God's own presence, power, and love. God waits for us to receive the gifts God offers. Don't limit God to one or two experiences or points of time in your life. Be open to God's empowerment for life and ministry now and all the time. You can't buy it or earn it. It's a gift. Receive it.

Receive God's gift of forgiveness and new life. Receive God's gift of the Holy Spirit. Commit to being part of the Holy Spirit's community, the church. Commit to finding ways to tell the good news wherever you go.