
Signs of Life: Motive

Acts 8:1-24

August 8, 2026

CUSTOM

Thanks to all who helped with the car show.

Crystal Davis - Missionary focus for the month to share a few minutes about what she is doing.

Second Sunday tonight

SCRIPTURE

Acts 8:1-24 (NKJV) [1] Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. [2] And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. [3] As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. [4] Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. [5] Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. [6] And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. [7] For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. [8] And there was great joy in that city. [9] 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, [10] to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the great power of God." [11] And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time. [12] 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. [13] 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. [14] Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, [15] who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. [16] For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. [17] Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. [18] And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, [19] saying, "Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit." [20] But Peter said to him, "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! [21] You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. [22] Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. [23] For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity." [24] Then Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me."

Introduction

As we continue through the book of Acts, we are watching the gospel move outward with a force that no human opposition can stop. What began with a small group of praying disciples in Jerusalem has become a growing movement of men and women filled with the Holy Spirit, convinced of the resurrection of Jesus, and unwilling to remain silent about what they have seen and heard.

By the time we reach Acts 8, the resistance against the church has intensified. Stephen has been murdered for his witness, Saul is leading a violent campaign against believers, homes are being

entered, families are being torn apart, and Christians are being dragged away to prison. From a human perspective, this should have been the moment when the church collapsed under pressure.

But that is not what happened.

Acts 8:4 tells us:

SCRIPTURE

Acts 8:4 (NKJV) [4] Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.

The persecution scattered the believers, but it did not silence them. In fact, the enemy's attempt to contain the gospel became one of the very means God used to spread it.

ILLUSTRATION

Watchman Nee's silent sermon - drinking from a glass then smashing it.

Saul believed he was stamping out the church, but he was actually striking a spiritual beehive. Believers were driven out of Jerusalem and carried the message of Jesus with them into Judea, Samaria, and beyond.

That tells us something important about the spiritual condition of these early Christians. They were not merely attending meetings or identifying themselves with a religious movement. They were deeply convinced that Jesus was alive, that the gospel was true, and that people desperately needed to hear it. Their faith had taken hold of their hearts so completely that even persecution could not extinguish their witness.

That is where this passage begins to confront us.

We are all motivated by something. Every decision we make, every priority we establish, and every sacrifice we are willing to endure reveals what matters most to us. We make time for what we value. We speak freely about what excites us. We endure difficulty for the things we believe are worth pursuing.

So when we look at these believers, we have to ask an honest question: **What motivated them to continue preaching Christ when doing so could cost them their homes, their freedom, and even their lives? Was it self glory, recognition, and power, or something else?**

And then the question becomes more personal: **What motivates us?**

QUOTE

Oswald Chambers wrote: "The men and women our Lord sends out on His endeavors are ordinary human people, but people who are motivated by their devotion to Him, which has been brought about through the work of the Holy Spirit."

Acts 8 introduces us to two men who help expose the difference between healthy and corrupt spiritual motivation.

The first is Philip, an ordinary servant in the church whom God uses in extraordinary ways. Philip is motivated by love for Christ, compassion for people, and obedience to the leading of the Spirit.

The second is Simon, a man who is fascinated by spiritual power but whose heart remains consumed with himself. Philip wants Jesus to be known. Simon wants himself to be known. Philip sees people who need salvation. Simon sees power that might advance his own influence.

Through these two men, Acts 8 teaches us that it is not enough merely to be interested in spiritual things. We must allow God to examine what is driving us. Regarding motive, Paul spoke of what motivated him in the ministry.

SCRIPTURE

1 Timothy 1:5 (NKJV) [5] Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith,

The big idea of this passage is this:

QUOTE

A spiritually alive believer is motivated by sincere love, a pure heart, and a willing obedience to the purposes of God.

When I look at Phillip, this is what I see. And that begins with a sincere love for those who need Christ.

MAIN POINT 1

A sincere love for the lost

SCRIPTURE

Scripture

Acts 8:5-8 (NKJV) - Then Philip went down (if you were in Jerusalem, no matter where you went, you were always going down) to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. And there was great joy in that city.

Context: Philip had been scattered from Jerusalem because of persecution, but wherever he went, he carried the gospel with him. He did not treat his **displacement** as a **disruption** to his plans. He saw it as an opportunity to make Christ known.

- That is an important perspective for every believer. We often think of ministry as something that happens when life is settled, convenient, and predictable.
- Philip shows us that God often does some of His most significant work through circumstances we never would have chosen. Philip had been driven from his home, separated from the church in Jerusalem, and forced into unfamiliar territory. Yet rather than becoming consumed with what he had lost, he became attentive to the people God had placed in front of him.

And where did Philip go? He went to Samaria.

That detail matters because the relationship between Jews and Samaritans was marked by generations of hostility, suspicion, and religious division. The Samaritans were despised by many Jewish people and regarded as spiritually compromised and ethnically impure. Philip had likely grown up hearing all the familiar reasons why Jews should keep their distance from Samaritans.

QUOTE

A popular saying by Jewish rabbis in those days was: "Let no man eat the bread of the Cuthites (the Samaritans), for he who eats their bread is as he who eats swine's flesh."

Yet when Philip entered Samaria, he did not see people to avoid. He saw people who needed Jesus.

That is one of the clearest signs that the love of Christ had transformed his heart. The gospel had not merely changed what Philip believed about God. It had changed how he saw people.

He loved them enough to preach Christ to them

Verse 5 says that Philip "preached Christ to them." That was the center of his ministry. He did not go to Samaria simply to condemn their history, debate their traditions, or remind them of everything that separated them from the Jews. He went there to announce that Jesus Christ had come to save

sinners.

This does not mean Philip avoided truth or ignored error. Love does not require us to soften the gospel or pretend that sin does not matter. Genuine love tells the truth because only the truth can set people free. But Philip did not preach Christ with the cold satisfaction of proving the Samaritans wrong. He preached because he wanted them to be saved. This is where motive matters:

APPLICATION

It is possible to speak true things with the wrong heart. Paul acknowledged that some preached Christ from envy, rivalry, and selfish ambition. Their message may have included truth, but their motives were corrupted. Philip's ministry was different. His willingness to enter Samaria and preach to people his culture had taught him to despise revealed that the love of Christ had broken through the old hostility.

Kent Hughes captured the heart of Philip's ministry well:

QUOTE

“Primarily, however, Philip preached with power because he loved Jesus. He was not an apostle. He was not a big shot. He was, in fact, a refugee in a hostile environment. But once in Samaria, he was so full of love for Christ that he could not stop telling others about Jesus.”

Philip's love for the lost did not begin with the lost. It began with his love for Christ.

That order is essential. We cannot sustain a genuine burden for people merely through human compassion, guilt, or pressure. Human emotion rises and falls. People can be difficult, resistant, ungrateful, and even hostile. If our motivation depends entirely upon how people respond to us, we will eventually become discouraged, bitter, or indifferent.

But when we love Jesus, we begin to care about what He cares about. We begin to see people not merely through the lens of their behavior, politics, background, or hostility, but as souls created in the image of God who desperately need redemption.

This is why Jesus asked Peter three times, “Do you love Me?” before commanding him to feed His sheep. Christlike ministry must flow from love for Christ. Otherwise, we may serve people for recognition, control, affirmation, or personal significance.

You cannot faithfully love the people of Christ for long unless you first love Christ Himself.

Paul said it this way:

SCRIPTURE

2 Corinthians 5:14 (NKJV) [14] For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died;

The word “compels” carries the idea of being constrained or pressed forward by something powerful. Paul was saying that the love Christ had shown him had taken hold of his life so completely that he could no longer live only for himself.

That was Philip’s motivation. He had been loved by Christ, saved by Christ, and filled with the Spirit of Christ. Therefore, he could not remain silent about Christ.

And when people truly receive Christ, the result is what we see in verse 8:

■ *“And there was great joy in that city.”*

That is what the gospel brings. Not shallow happiness or temporary excitement, but the deep joy of knowing that our sins are forgiven, that we have been reconciled to God, that death no longer has the final word, and that we belong to Christ forever.

APPLICATION

So the question is not simply whether we believe in evangelism. Most Christians would say that we do. The question is whether the love of Christ is actually moving us toward people.

Do we see the lost primarily as opponents to defeat, irritations to avoid, or people for whom Christ died?

Philip went to Samaria. He crossed the barriers of prejudice, history, and hostility because the love of Christ was greater than the divisions of his culture.

Perhaps the Lord is calling some of us to repent of a love that has grown narrow. We may love people who look like us, vote like us, agree with us, and treat us well. But the love of Christ reaches farther than that.

Christ did not wait until we were lovable before He came for us.

SCRIPTURE

Romans 5:8 (NKJV) [8] But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

The love that saved us is the love that must now motivate us.

We do not preach Christ because we believe we are better than others. We preach Christ because we know we are not. We are sinners who have found mercy, beggars who have found bread, and people who have been rescued by grace.

So may the Lord give us a sincere love for the lost, a love that sees people clearly, speaks truth courageously, and longs above all else for them to know Jesus.

MAIN POINT 2

Motivated from a Pure Heart

SCRIPTURE

Acts 8:8-10 (NKJV) [8] And there was great joy in that city. [9] 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, [10] to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the great power of God."

As our story continues, we see the importance of having a pure heart towards the things of God.

- There are many out there that desire to manipulate and use the gospel for personal gain, positioning, and power. Paul refers to these people as those who "see godliness as a means of great gain."
- These are those who see church, the Bible, and the gospel through carnal eyes. They give themselves a title like pastor or bishop or apostle; they speak passionately and authoritatively.

May I introduce you to Simon. Not Simon Peter, the humble fisherman, but Simon the sorcerer.

In many ways Simon becomes the contrast to Philip. Philip had come into Samaria preaching Christ, serving people, and pointing attention away from himself. Simon, on the other hand, had spent years building a reputation around himself. Acts 8:9 says that he practiced sorcery, astonished the people, and was ***"claiming that he was someone great."***

SCRIPTURE

Proverbs 27:2 (NKJV) - Let another man praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips.

Prior to Philip showing up with the gospel, these people had been spellbound and spiritually oppressed by the trickery and sorcery of this man named Simon. Simon was a man who reveled in the accolades and praises of men. He thrived off of having authority and control over the people. And in the midst of it all, he used God as a platform. Notice the title people used of him: **"The great power of God."** The Samaritans also believed in Yahweh, so Simon must have been using God's name and attributing it to

himself.

But notice that the fruit didn't match up:

- The true power of God sets people free; Simon was putting people into bondage.
- The true power of God glorifies Jesus Christ; Simon was glorifying himself.
- The true power of God is genuine and supernatural; Simon's power was contrived, human trickery.
- The true power of God is wielded through servant-hearted, humble people; Simon was a self-promoting, selfishly ambitious man.

This gives us a window into Simon's heart. He was accustomed to being noticed. He was used to people being impressed. His identity and influence were tied to the attention he received from others. Then Philip arrived, preaching the gospel with genuine spiritual power, and suddenly the attention of the city began to shift.

The difference between these two men is striking. Philip's ministry caused people to look to Jesus. Simon's influence caused people to look to Simon. Philip wanted people set free. Simon had built his reputation by keeping people captivated. Philip was content to be a vessel. Simon wanted to be the attraction.

APPLICATION

It is possible to do spiritual things for very unspiritual reasons. A person can preach, serve, lead, give, teach, sing, or exercise a spiritual gift while underneath it all being driven by recognition, insecurity, ambition, money, control, or the need to feel important. The activity may be good. The words may even be true. But God is not merely concerned with what we do. He is concerned with what is happening in the heart while we do it.

Jesus addressed this repeatedly in Matthew 6. He talked about people who gave, prayed, and fasted. None of those things were wrong. In fact, they were spiritually commendable practices. But Jesus warned that even good things can become corrupted when the motive is to “be seen by men.”

That is a sobering truth for anyone who serves the Lord.

QUOTE

A good work can still come from a bad motive.

That is why purity of heart matters so much.

Acts 8:12–13 says:

“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.”

Simon’s response is one of the more difficult parts of the passage because Luke tells us that he “believed” and was baptized. Yet later Peter tells him that his heart is not right before God and that he is “poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.” We should be careful not to say more than the text says, but at the very least, whatever Simon professed had not yet produced the kind of repentance and inward transformation that should accompany genuine faith.

CUSTOM

This is especially sobering when we remember the historical setting. In the first-century world, magic and sorcery were often treated as a kind of spiritual trade. Practitioners claimed access to hidden powers, secret words, sacred names, and rituals that could bring healing, protection, influence, or status. Ancient magical texts and amulets show how common it was for people to try to harness divine or spiritual power for personal benefit.

Later in Acts, when the gospel confronts similar practices in Ephesus, many who had practiced magic publicly burned their costly books, valued at fifty thousand pieces of silver. That moment shows how deeply profitable such practices could be. Simon had lived in that world. Luke says he had “amazed the people of Samaria” and claimed to be someone great. So when he encountered the true power of God through the apostles, his old instincts came rushing back. He was not merely seeing miracles; he was seeing a power greater than his own reputation, greater than his craft, greater than anything he had ever handled.

That is where the danger becomes very real.

APPLICATION

A person can want what God gives without actually wanting God.

- We can want peace without repentance, blessing without surrender, influence without servanthood, power without humility, and gifts without submission.

Simon wanted the benefits of the kingdom while still thinking according to the values of the world.

When Peter and John came down from Jerusalem and prayed for the Samaritan believers, the Holy Spirit came upon them in an evident way. Simon saw what happened and immediately tried to obtain the same ability.

Acts 8:18–19 says:

“And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, saying, ‘Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’”

Simon assumed that spiritual power operated the same way worldly influence often operates. If something is valuable enough, perhaps it can be bought. If a position is desirable enough, perhaps it can be negotiated. If influence is powerful enough, perhaps it can be acquired through money, leverage, or status.

The later history of the church even took Simon's name and attached it to the sin of trying to purchase spiritual office or influence: **"simony."** Whatever we make of the later traditions about Simon, the warning from Acts is clear.

The gifts of God are not products to be purchased, techniques to be mastered, or tools to build a name for oneself. They are holy gifts from a holy God, given by the risen Christ, through the person of the Holy Spirit, for the glory of God and the good of His people. Simon did not immediately see the power of God as something holy to submit to. He saw it as something valuable to possess.

But Simon was about to learn:

QUOTE

The world's currency does not work in God's economy.

APPLICATION

You also can't do this in a church setting. Some think that if they just throw enough worldly resources into something, it can create something spiritual.

- You can't build a sanctuary that will produce spiritual power.
- You can't build a worship team and sound system and lighting rig that will create an anointing.
- You can't earn a title that will make you a usable vessel.
- Whatever gifts, opportunities, influence, or power God gives are gifts of grace, and they are given according to His will for His glory.

Paul expresses this beautifully in 2 Corinthians 4:7:

SCRIPTURE

2 Corinthians 4:7 (NKJV) [7] But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.

That is the whole point of spiritual power. God deliberately places His treasure in ordinary, fragile people so that when something genuinely powerful happens, the attention ultimately goes back to Him.

QUOTE

The goal of ministry is not for people to leave impressed with the vessel, but with the Savior.

Simon had the order backwards. He wanted the power of God to enhance his reputation, while Philip was willing for the power of God to make Jesus known.

Be wary of any influence that promotes **the gifts over the gospel** or **wonders over the Word**, or **miracles over the messiah**.

It would be easy for us to read Simon's story and not see the relevance. After all, most of us have never tried to hand an apostle money in exchange for spiritual gifts. But the root of Simon's sin can appear in much more respectable forms.

APPLICATION

It shows up when we become jealous because someone else is being used by God. It appears when we need recognition for serving, when we are more excited about visibility than faithfulness, or when our sense of value begins to depend on whether people notice what we are doing. It can show up when we chase titles, exaggerate our influence, compete with other ministries, or quietly resent someone else's success.

That is why anyone who serves the Lord needs to regularly invite God to examine the heart. Psalm 139 gives us a prayer that should remain close to every believer who wants to be used by God:

*"Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me, and know my anxieties;
And see if there is any wicked way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting."*

Notice Peter's direct response to this request:

Peter responds:

"Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God."

Peter does not simply correct Simon's theology. He goes beneath the bad idea and identifies the deeper problem. **"Your heart is not right in the sight of God."**

That is the real issue. Simon's request was merely the fruit. The root was in the heart. As we commonly say,

QUOTE

Roots create shoots that bear fruit.

The J.B. Phillips translation actually translates verse 21 as Peter saying, ***"To hell with you and your money!"*** Offensive to us? Yes. But an accurate translation nonetheless. But here is the truth: sometimes people are so wrapped up in sin that they can't even see it. Sometimes they need to be shocked and reminded about how dangerous that sin really is.

SCRIPTURE

Jude 1:22-23 (NKJV) [22] And on some have compassion, making a distinction; [23] but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh.

So Peter does not tell Simon merely to make a better decision next time. He tells him to repent.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 8:22 (NKJV) [22] Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you.

There is actually grace in the severity of Peter's response. Peter cares enough about Simon to tell him the truth before his corrupted motives destroy him. He refuses to flatter him or minimize the danger of what is happening in his heart.

Proverbs says:

■ *"Faithful are the wounds of a friend."*

Sometimes truth wounds before it heals. ***But a loving wound that leads to repentance is far better than affirmation that leaves a person bound in sin.***

APPLICATION

And that gives us a very practical principle for the Christian life: when God exposes something impure in our motives, the answer is not defensiveness. It is repentance.

- When He reveals pride, repent.
- When He reveals jealousy, repent.
- When He exposes a craving for recognition or resentment toward someone else's success, repent.

QUOTE

A pure heart is not a heart that never needs correction. A pure heart is a heart that responds humbly to correction.

And perhaps one of the simplest tests of motivation is this: **If nobody knew I did it, would I still want to do it? That reveals the thought of our hearts.**

APPLICATION

Would I still serve if nobody thanked me? Would I still give if nobody knew? Would I still pray if nobody heard? Would I still obey if the assignment felt small and insignificant? Would I still be content if someone else received the credit?

QUOTE

The problem is not having influence. The problem is needing it.

Philip wanted Jesus to be great. Simon wanted to be great.

And before God is concerned with what He can do through our hands, He is deeply concerned with what is happening in our hearts.

Wrapped in Bitterness

Peter has already told Simon that his heart is not right before God, but then in verse 23 he gives us an even stronger description of what he sees:

■ *“For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.”*

Simon had spent years cultivating an image of greatness. He was accustomed to being admired, followed, and regarded as someone possessing unusual spiritual power. Then Philip arrived, and suddenly Simon was no longer the most impressive person in Samaria. The crowds were turning toward Christ.

Peter looks beneath Simon’s request for power and sees something deeper: **bitterness had poisoned his heart.**

We are not told exactly what Simon was bitter about, so we should be careful not to speculate. But Peter clearly recognizes that Simon’s problem was more than honest curiosity about spiritual gifts. Something sinful had taken root within him, and that internal corruption was now shaping the way he viewed the work of God.

APPLICATION

That is one of the dangers of bitterness. **Bitterness rarely stays confined to the original wound that produced it.** Hebrews 12 warns us about a “root of bitterness” springing up and causing trouble.

A root grows beneath the surface before its fruit becomes visible above ground. In the same way, unresolved resentment, jealousy, disappointment, or wounded pride can quietly reshape the way we think until eventually we begin interpreting everything through it.

Instead of rejoicing that Samaria was being transformed by the gospel, he saw the power of God and immediately began thinking about how he might possess it himself.

Peter therefore tells him to repent. Not simply to rethink his offer, but to deal with the heart from which the offer came. Because bitterness is not cured by gaining more influence. Pride is not healed by receiving more recognition. Jealousy is not satisfied when we finally get the position we wanted. Those things have to be brought before the Lord and surrendered.

The answer to a poisoned heart is repentance.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 8:24 (NKJV) - Then Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me."

He was rightly afraid, but he still missed the point. He thought that Peter and John had to pray for him, that he couldn't do it himself. He still had his eyes on men instead of Jesus.

APPLICATION

By the way, some of you might have come from backgrounds where you were taught that you need to pray to saints and pray to Mary in order to get your prayers moved up the ladder. Let me just set you free for a moment: You can pray straight to Jesus yourself! Surrender is personal, someone else can't surrender to God what you possess.

Conclusion

And that brings us back to where we began: **motive.**

Acts 8 gives us two men standing near the same extraordinary work of God, but responding from very different hearts.

- Philip had been driven from his home by persecution, yet he arrived in Samaria asking, in effect, “How can Christ be made known here?” Simon watched the same revival unfold and began asking,

“How can I get this power?”

- Philip saw people who needed Jesus. Simon saw an opportunity to increase his influence.

And perhaps that is the question the Holy Spirit wants to leave with us today. Not simply, **“What am I doing for God?”** but, **“Why am I doing it?”**

God knows whether we are serving from love or obligation, whether we are seeking His glory or our own recognition, whether we genuinely want people to know Jesus or simply want people to think highly of us.

That does not mean our motives will always be perfectly pure. We are still people whom God is sanctifying, and pride has an annoying ability to attach itself even to good things. The question is what we do when God exposes it.

- If our love for the lost has grown cold, we can return to Christ.
- If pride has attached itself to our service, we can repent.
- If jealousy or bitterness has begun poisoning the way we look at others, we can bring it into the light.

Because the goal of the Christian life is not to become impressive people who accomplish impressive things for God. It is to become surrendered people through whom Jesus Christ can accomplish whatever He desires.