

# Empowered

The Amazing Church of Jesus Christ

Week 4

The Conversion of Saul

Acts 1:1 – 2:47

Teacher Notes

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*Bible versions used throughout the Empowered teacher notes are  
NASB, ESV, NLT, and CEB.*

## ✧ Introduction to Week Four

**ILLUSTRATION:** A couple lived on two acres with their property adjoining ten acres of pine trees. One evening the husband noticed a small fire through the pines, then he witnessed it burst into a mighty fire!

A small fire started in an upper room on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), as the small tongues of fire settled on one hundred and twenty believers who were gathered. The church grew to eight thousand men plus their families! (Acts 2 and 4)

- In Acts 1:8, Jesus commanded His followers to be witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the remotest parts of the earth.
- Acts 8 begins with a time reference—*on that day*—the day Stephen was stoned; a great persecution arose against the church.
  - ~ Men and women who loved Jesus Christ were dragged out of their homes, were bound, and thrown into prison.
  - ~ Some believers were murdered.
  - ~ Some were forced through torture to blaspheme.

⇒ **One of the leaders of this horrible persecution was a man named Saul.**

- Believers scattered—probably several thousand witnesses for Christ fled Jerusalem at that time.
  - ~ Some went to Judea and beyond.
  - ~ We know of one who went to Samaria—his name was Philip.

**TEACHING TIP:** The goal of this persecution was to quell the gospel message—yet it spurred on the very thing it wanted to destroy! The gospel message was now on the move!

▲ **QUOTE:** Tertullian, one of the first Christian apologists (around 200 AD) said, *“The blood of Christians is the seed of the church.”*

- As we study this week, we will see the trait of courage displayed in Philip, Saul, and Peter. Their bold confidence was not a result of their own strength. Rather we will see how the Holy Spirit empowered them with courage to preach Jesus, in spite of the opposition and persecution that came upon them.

## Study One:

### **Acts 8:4-25      The Gospel Goes to Samaria**

- Before we can begin, it is important to understand who the Samaritans were and their relationship with the Jews:
  1. They were considered half-breeds by the Jews.

2. They believed only in the Pentateuch.
3. They worshiped at Mount Gerizim.
4. They were considered enemies of the Jews.

**TEACHING TIP:** Two examples of the relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans are found in the scripture references below:

- ✠ **John 4:7,9**—Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well. She was shocked by His request that she give Him a drink from the well— *“How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?” (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans).”*
- ✠ **Luke 9:54**—James and John wanted to rain down fire upon a village in Samaria.

- It is also important to have some background on Philip:
  1. He was the first recorded missionary and the only one to be called an evangelist.
  2. Miracles validated his message. He freed those who suffered from demon possession, those who were paralyzed, and those who were lame.

- Philip preached the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, and many were baptized. The natural outflow was great rejoicing in the city.

**TEACHING TIP:** A flame that started in Jerusalem was growing in power, lighting the path to heaven for those who were once enemies.

→ **NOTE:** This is the first time in Acts where we see the ministry of God’s Word move from Jewish territory.

⇒ **Simon displayed courage in proclaiming the gospel in ‘enemy’ territory—a courage that came through the power of the Holy Spirit.**

- In Acts 8:9-11 we are introduced to a man called Simon—
  - ~ He practiced magic. He was a sorcerer.
  - ~ He claimed to be someone great.
  - ~ The people acknowledged and referred to him as the “Great Power of God.”
  - ~ All were giving their attention to him because he astonished them with his “magic arts.”

**TEACHING TIP:** Consider what God’s Word says about magic and sorcery in the Old and New Testament:

- ✠ **Deuteronomy 18:10** *“There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer ...” (ESV)*
- ✠ **Galatians 5:19-20, 21b** *“Now the deeds of the flesh are evident which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”*

- But then the people heard Philip’s preaching and they responded by being baptized, both men and women.
- Even the sorcerer Simon believed and was baptized. (Acts 8:13)
- Simon went with Philip and observed the signs and great miracles that Philip could perform. Simon was constantly amazed by what Philip could do. (Acts 8:13)

**TEACHING TIP:** What might have motivated Simon in his ‘magic arts?’ Possibly, praise or a desire for respect, admiration, influence, power, or an opportunity to make money.

- ▲ **QUOTE:** In his commentary on Acts (*Be Dynamite*) Warren Wiersbe stated— *“Simon’s sorcery was energized by Satan and was used to magnify himself while Philip’s miracles were empowered by God and were used to glorify Christ.”*
- Beginning in Acts 8:14, we learn that the apostles in Jerusalem had heard about all the good things happening in Samaria regarding the Word of God. They sent Peter and John to Samaria to pray that the Samaritans might receive the Holy Spirit.

**TEACHING TIP:** We learned here that the people had not yet received the Holy Spirit. Normally the Holy Spirit indwelled and sealed a person at the moment of faith, but this time it was delayed for very important purposes:

1. God wanted to unite the Samaritans with the original Jewish church in Jerusalem to make one church. There were not to be two churches!
2. It verified to Peter and John the inclusion of a new group of people into the church.
3. It also revealed the need for the Samaritans to come under apostolic authority.

- ⇒ **God sent Peter and John not to bestow the Holy Spirit, but to witness the Samaritans receiving the Spirit to assure them that God had accepted them as full-fledged brothers and sisters in His Kingdom.**
- Simon witnessed the people receiving the Holy Spirit, and his response revealed his heart— *“Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, saying ‘Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’”* (Acts 8:18-19)
- Peter immediately admonished Simon for wanting to pay for the Spirit, revealing that Simon thought he could purchase the gift of God (salvation) with money.
- ✠ Acts 8:20 *“But Peter said to him, ‘May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!’”*
- Peter addressed the truth about Simon—
  - ~ His heart was not right before God.
  - ~ He was a bitter man and in the bondage of iniquity.

- ~ Simon needed to repent and ask forgiveness from God.

**TEACHING TIP:** A final note on Simon—

- ~ There was no evidence that he was truly born again.
- ~ He is frequently mentioned in ancient writings.
- ~ He became the archenemy of the church and one of the founders of Gnosticism.
- ~ ‘Simony’ means the buying and selling of church offices or privileges.

## Study Two:

### **Acts 8:26-40      The Ethiopian’s Journey to Faith**

- ⇒ **Philip was now leading a vibrant church of Samaritan believers who had received the Holy Spirit, been accepted by the apostles, and was rejoicing in the Spirit.**
- An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip in Acts 8:26-27— *“Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza. (This is a desert road.) So he got up and went ...”*

**TEACHING TIP:** Philip was leading an active, growing ministry. He had been “hands on” in building this church. In the midst of his faithful serving, the Lord tells him to “get up and go”—in other words, leave what you are doing (which Philip was doing well). This command offered no specifics—not a reason or even an exact location. There was no ‘what, where, or why’ offered. But Philip got up and went immediately in obedience to the Lord. Obedience, like this, takes courageous faith to walk into the unknown.

- In the same verse in which Philip is told to ‘get up and go,’ we are introduced to an Ethiopian eunuch.
- What do we learn about this man?
  1. He was a eunuch, a male who had been surgically castrated—this was done so that he could serve in the palace.
  2. He was from Ethiopia, which was a large kingdom located south of Egypt. It was a highly developed area during this time.
  3. He was a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, and in charge of all her treasure.
- **NOTE:** The Ethiopian eunuch’s position, overseeing all the queen’s treasure, was a role that demanded absolute trust and intelligence.
  4. He had come to Jerusalem to worship.
  5. He owned a copy of the law, which would have cost him a fortune, indicating he was a man of wealth and knowledge.

- In verse 28 we find the eunuch reading the passage from Isaiah 53:7-8. He was confused, unable to understand who the scripture was referring to. He wondered—*Who* was led to slaughter like lamb? *Who* remained quiet and was taken away and his life removed from earth?
  - Once again Philip was told by the Spirit to join the eunuch on his chariot. And once again we witnessed immediate obedience from Philip.
  - Philip used this Old Testament passage to preach Jesus, to evangelize. The eunuch believed and was baptized. (Acts 8:30-38)
  - As Philip and the eunuch came out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away and the eunuch no longer saw him. The eunuch returned home rejoicing!
  - Philip found himself at Azotus which was twenty miles north of Gaza. He travelled on and continued preaching the gospel to all the cities until he arrived in Caesarea.
- **NOTE:** In Acts 21:8-9 we are told that Paul stayed with Philip and his family of four daughters, all of whom were prophetesses.

**TEACHING TIP:** Do you see that Philip had a divine appointment with the Ethiopian eunuch? The eunuch's salvation was the reason Philip was to get up and go and preach Jesus!

## Study Three:

### **Acts 9:1-19a      The Light Shines into Darkness**

- The next event—Saul's conversion—is perhaps the greatest one in church history, after the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. His Jesus story is so important it is told three times in Acts (Chapters 9, 22, 26).
- Saul was first introduced in Acts 7:58, as he watched with approval Stephen being stoned to death. Those involved with the stoning laid their cloaks at Saul's feet.
  - ~ He was a Pharisee of Pharisees.
  - ~ He was zealous for the Jewish faith.
  - ~ His temperament revealed that he knew nothing of half-measures.
  - ~ He was bent on eradicating the Christian church.

⇒ **Saul was about to experience a divine appointment with Jesus! And he would never be the same again.**

- In Acts 9 Saul was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. He had letters from the High Priest that gave him permission to bound any followers of Jesus, man or woman, and bring them back to Jerusalem.

**TEACHING TIP:** The phrase "breathing threats and murder" gives us a picture of a cruel and violent Saul.

- As Saul approached Damascus, a light from heaven flashed around him.
  - ~ This was possibly the Shekinah glory.
  - ~ Later it would be said that Saul saw the Lord Himself. This was fundamental to his apostleship. (Acts 9:17, 27; 22:18)
  - ~ Saul fell to the ground.
- Saul heard a voice ask, *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”* (Acts 9:4)
- Can you imagine this scene? Saul immediately responded, with *“Who are you, Lord?”*
  - ~ At this point Saul experienced a crisis of faith.
- In Acts 9:5-6, Jesus responded with a declaration and a command— *“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.”*
  - ~ The declaration: I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.
  - ~ Paul’s recognition: He had participated in killing Stephen, one of Jesus’ followers.
  - ~ The command: Get up and enter Damascus, and there you will learn what you are to do.
- Saul rose from the ground, blind. His companions led him into Damascus. For three days he stayed with a man whose name was Judas. (Acts 9:8-9, 11)
- As Saul waited in the home of Judas, a disciple named Ananias had a visit from the Lord. He was told to go to Saul with God’s message.
- The message that Ananias gave to Saul was two-fold:
  1. You are Christ’s chosen instrument to bear His name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel.
  2. You will suffer for the name Jesus Christ.
- Ananias laid hands on Saul. Immediately the scales fell off his eyes and he regained his sight and was filled with the Holy Spirit. Saul got up and was baptized.
- **NOTE:** Saul was transformed through the Spirit of God from a Pharisee who sought the approval of others to a man who only sought the approval of God.
- ⇒ **Saul had gone to persecute those who believed the gospel of Jesus Christ, and he ended up preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ!**

**TEACHING TIP:** What is meant by “Me?” The church is referred to as the body of Christ.

**TEACHING TIP:** Consider the courage it took for Ananias to go to Saul! Saul was infamous as a cruel persecutor of Christians! The Holy Spirit empowered his courage to go and speak truth to Saul.

*“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, this person is a new creation; the old things passed away; behold new things have come.”* (2 Corinthians 5:17)

## Study Four:

### **Acts 9:19b-31      A New Man on a New Mission**

- Saul, with courage fueled by the fire of the Holy Spirit, immediately began to preach Christ in Damascus.
- After many days had elapsed a group of Jews who did not like the change in Saul and his preaching plotted to kill him.
- A personal crisis of persecution for the name of Jesus Christ was befalling Saul! He and the disciples heard about this plot and planned his escape from Damascus. They put Saul in a basket and lowered him through an opening in the wall. (Acts 9:23-25)

**TEACHING TIP:** Scripture tells us that the Jews were confounded by this 'new' Saul and what he now taught. A radical change! Preaching with confidence what he had earlier utterly rejected!

**TEACHING TIP:** This may be the time in which Paul spent three years in Arabia as he shared in Galatians 1:17, 18a— *"... nor did I go to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem ..."*

- When Saul did go to Jerusalem, he tried to associate with the disciples there, but was not positively received by them. Not only were they afraid of him, but they also doubted that he as truly a disciple of Jesus Christ. (Acts 9:26)
  - Barnabas, stepped in and stepped up for Saul! He brought him to the apostles and testified to the changes in Saul, that he, indeed, was a believer, a disciple who spoke boldly of Jesus. (Acts 9:27)
  - Saul began to preach in Jerusalem. Later, he would be responsible for writing thirteen of the New Testament books—hammering out church doctrine.
  - The church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace; it was built up and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit. And the church continued to increase.
- ⇒ **We have seen courage displayed in the lives Philip and Saul, thus far. It was the Holy Spirit who empowered them. The Spirit gave courage to Philip to preach the gospel during persecution and when plans changed. Saul was given courage to preach the gospel during a great personal crisis.**

## Study Five:

### **Acts 9:32-43      Peter, the Itinerant Preacher**

- In Matthew 16:19 Jesus gave the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” to Peter. This meant that Peter would have the privilege of opening the door of faith to others.
    - ~ To the Jews at Pentecost by his preaching—thousands came to Christ.
    - ~ To the Samaritans through his prayers, laying his hands on them, and the Holy Spirit came upon them.
  - In this last day of study, we see Peter open the door of faith to the Gentiles.
  - Peter traveled to Lydda and Joppa, which were Gentile territories. God gave Peter two signs of encouragement for the people there:
    1. In Lydda: Peter healed a man name Aeneas who had been paralyzed for eight years.
    2. In Joppa: Peter raised a disciple named Tabitha (Dorcas) from the dead. (Like Jesus had raised the Jairus’ daughter, as told in Mark 5)
  - Peter then stayed many days in the home of a tanner named Simon.
- ⇒ **The power of the Holy Spirit gave Peter courage to overcome prejudices and to proclaim the gospel to Gentiles.**

**TEACHING TIP:** Staying with a tanner was an abomination to the Jews. It is said that tanners had to make their home fifty cubits outside of town.

## **✦ FINAL THOUGHTS**

- ✦ **The gospel was passed on to the apostles, then to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, Ethiopia, and throughout Gentile territory.**
- ✦ **The work continues as the baton of faith in Jesus Christ is passed from one generation to another—mighty men and women whose courage is fueled by the fire of faith, empowered by the Holy Spirit.**

**ILLUSTRATION:** One such man of courageous faith was Hudson Taylor.

- ~ In 1849, at the age of seventeen, Hudson Taylor gave his life to Jesus Christ.
- ~ He soon felt that the Lord was calling him to China, so for three years he disciplined himself for that ministry.
  - \* He learned the language.
  - \* He only took cold showers.
  - \* He refused a comfortable bed.
  - \* He changed his eating habits and the type of food he consumed.
  - \* He went to medical school.
- ~ At age twenty, Hudson Taylor sailed from Liverpool to Shanghai, and he would call China his home for the rest of his life.
- ~ He married and had a family there.
- ~ Persecution arose against Christians. Their compound was attacked and burned, and all their belongings were taken. His family had to flee for their lives.
- ⇒ **But by the power of the Holy Spirit Hudson Taylor had courage to preach the gospel during this great persecution.**
- ~ After several years of ministry, Hudson became ill and had to return to England. And there by the power of the Holy Spirit (when plans had changed), he preached the gospel.
- ~ During his decades of ministry, Hudson Taylor lost four of his eight children; and his beloved wife died.
- ⇒ **Through personal pain, crisis, and loss he still preached the gospel.**
- ~ Hudson Taylor died at the age of seventy-three. Today he is still known as the most widely used missionary in China's history.
- ~ During his fifty-one years of service there, his China Inland Mission did remarkable work:
  - \* Established twenty mission stations.
  - \* Brought eight hundred and forty-nine missionaries to the field (nine hundred and sixty-eight by 1911).
  - \* Trained some seven hundred Chinese workers.
  - \* Developed a witnessing Chinese church of one hundred and twenty-five thousand. (It has been said that at least thirty-five thousand were Hudson Taylor's own converts and that he baptized some fifty thousand.)
- ~ His gift for inspiring people to give themselves and the possessions to Christ was amazing.
- ⇒ **Hudson Taylor's courage and unshakeable faith continued the work that the apostles, Paul, and thousands of others began soon after persecution started in Jerusalem.**

✦ **The Holy Spirit empowers us with courage to preach the gospel whether through persecution, personal crisis, change of plans, or simply when life is going well.**

- ✦ **Today one estimate states that there are 2.3 billion Christians in the world! All of them go back to their original spiritual fathers: James, John, Peter, Andrew, Matthew, Paul.**
- ✦ **Is anything holding you back from preaching the gospel or sharing your personal Jesus story (your testimony) in your area of influence? Are you willing to reach out to others in a way they can hear and embrace the truth of Jesus Christ? The Holy Spirit will give you the courage needed!**