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There are many miracles in Acts 8 but the best of them all may be a miracle that you have never, ever noticed before. You see as the story of what Jesus continued to do and teach through the early Church continues, we see one amazing thing happen after another. We see in verse 7 that impure spirits came out of many, and others who were paralysed or lame were healed. Now they are great miracles.

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And we see in verses 9-14 that the Samaritans turn from the great power of magic and believe in the word of God. That's also a miracle. And we see the apostles come up from Jerusalem and lay hands on these believers and Samaritan believers receive the Holy Spirit, another miracle. And we see the way that God orchestrated the events at just the right time that the Ethiopian official gets to meet the deacon Philip on a desert road. Another miracle. And we then the Spirit of the Lord takes Philip away from that place and suddenly he appears in Azotus. This passage is full of amazing miracles direct from the hand of God.

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But the most amazing miracle in my mind is none of those things. It is the formation of a multicultural church. For in Acts 8 the Church breaks out of its strict Jewish background. For by the end of the chapter we don't just have Jews from Israel & Jews from across the world in Church. We also have Samaritans, Jewish half castes & we even have Ethiopians. We have black and white, rich and poor, high officials and ordinary individuals all now one in Christ.

When I was training to be a minister, I was attached for two years to Bondi Presbyterian and that Church was literally a Noah's ark of nationalities. For we had two of each kind. Two Scots. Two Koreans. Two from PNG. Two from Africa. Two English. And about two Aussies. It wasn't a very big church! But that's a miracle. To break down the barriers of language, culture, temperament, background, status and meet together as one people under Christ.

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But that's the Church's calling. To show the world that *"there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, nor is there male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."* (Galatians 3:28). And that's our calling as well. To preach the gospel to the nations and to those who have come from every nation and who now live in our neighbourhood. To be one in the Spirit. To come together despite our differences. Because God has brought us into the one spiritual family, the Church. That's the miracle we see in Acts 8 and it all starts with

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1. Saul of Tarsus (verses 1-4)

8 & Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem & all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea & Samaria.

² Godly men buried Stephen & mourned deeply for him but Saul began to destroy the Church Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

The fact that the early church morphs into a multicultural church has its genesis in the persecution that Saul initiates. Saul was there when Stephen was killed. And seeing the Christian Church grow has made him angry, very angry. For they have turned their back on

the law of Moses. They are worshipping Jesus as if he is God! And so, he attacks the Church and the verb Luke uses is “destroy”, the same work used of a wild animal mangling its prey.

Saul when he later becomes a Christian says in 1 Timothy 1:13 that he was “a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man”. Elsewhere he calls himself the worst of all sinners. And he says that because he thought he was being zealous for God but instead he was persecuting God’s son Jesus. He was trying to tear apart the Church. And in a way he was successful!

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For everyone scattered. All but the apostles got out of Jerusalem. But as they go, they preached the word wherever they went. Now it is not just the apostles doing the evangelism, everyone is doing the evangelism and it is incredibly effective. The Church continues to grow. Despite the persecution, actually because of the persecution, the message of Jesus begins to make its way out of Jerusalem, on into Judea and Samaria and towards the ends of the earth. Up until now, the Church knew about the great commission to preach the word into all the earth but for some reason, the great commission had become the great omission. Now the word of God was really on the move.

As one commentator puts it, “the wind increases the flame.” I suppose a similar parallel in our modern times was what happened in China in 1949. The Communists had just come into power and one of their first acts was to expel all 687 China Inland Mission Missionaries. It looked like an absolute disaster for the Church and for China. But within 4 years almost half of those missionaries had been redeployed around Asia and when China opened up again to the West, the Church had flourished, it was now 30 to 40 times bigger than before.

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Let’s think about it this way. In Acts 8, God puts a bomb under a good Church. A Church that had powerful preaching, rich fellowship, amazing pastoral care, evangelistic zeal & powerful prayer. But had forgotten around it was a lost world. God puts a bomb under them to get them moving. Time and time ever throughout history God will disrupt Churches and ministries, even good Churches and good ministries to move the Church onto fresh pastures. And to do that He used Saul of Tarsus and secondly

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2. Philip of Caesarea (verses 5-8)

5th Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. 6th When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. 7th For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralysed or lame were healed. 8th So there was great joy in that city.

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Now we met Philip in Acts 6, he like Stephen was one of the deacons. Set aside to help the widows in their food distribution. But also, like Stephen he is a preacher and an evangelist. And all he needed was to be pushed out of the nest for him to begin to fly, really fly. So, when the Christians are persecuted in Jerusalem, Philip finds himself in Samaria. Not giving out bread but offering to all who want it the bread of life.

Here’s Philip, doing exactly what the apostles have been doing in Israel, doing what Jesus was doing in Israel. Healing cripples, driving out demons, seeing paralysed people walking again. In other words, & if you’re a Jew, & this’ll blow your mind, God is beginning to work in Samaria just like he has worked in Israel. As Philip proclaims the good news of Jesus. Slide 10

Now let's take a step back and remind ourselves why that is so mind blowing. For the Jews and the Samaritans have been enemies for just on 1,000 years. It began with the breakup of the Northern Kingdom from the people of Judea in the in the tenth century BC. It became worse in 722 BC when Assyria invaded the Northern Kingdom and deported most of the Jewish people and replaced them with foreigners. These foreigners then mixed their own religious beliefs with that of Moses and the first 5 books of the OT.

In the fourth century BC they built a rival Temple and formed a rival priesthood. So now in the first century AD, the Jews and the Samaritans hated each other and so Jews wouldn't even touch anything, not even a fork or a plate that a Samaritan had touched. But now these Jewish Christians had gone direct to their Samaritan neighbours and told them about eternal life through Jesus Christ and these Samaritans believed. In fact, a revival broke out.

When God sends revival on the Church, it truly is exciting times. In Wales in the 18th century, it all started when spiritual fire fell on a youth meeting in a small Church and historians say it could only be compared to the day of Pentecost! The young people were weeping and crying out to God to make a difference in their lives so they could make a difference in the world. Their fire spread to the adults who carried it throughout their city, and eventually throughout the country of Wales...and the ripple effect was felt around the world!

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In the OT we see revival hit Nineveh after the preaching of Jonah. And now a similar thing is happening here in Acts 8. Wouldn't it be wonderful to see something like that happen today? In the 1800s the evangelist Gypsy Smith was asked how to have a revival & he said, *"Go home, lock yourself in your room, draw a circle around yourself with chalk, and ask God to start a great revival within that circle! When God has answered your prayer, the revival will be underway!"* In other words, we should pray that God would start the work in us! Do you want God to revive his Church, this nation, our world? Well don't point the finger at anyone else, it starts with you. How does the old hymn put it, *"Send a revival, start the work with me."* In Acts 8, the work started with Philip but it doesn't end there. For next we turn to

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3. Simon of Samaria. (verses 9-25)

⁹ Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, ¹⁰ and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is rightly called the Great Power of God." Verse 13 ¹¹ They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery. ¹² But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. ¹³ Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw."

You see at the same time God grows true believers, Satan also sows weeds among the wheat, counterfeit believers. And so, to stop the growth of the Church, Satan plants Simon the Sorcerer at the heart of the Samaritan Church. Simon had access to great power through his knowledge of the dark arts of magic but even he was impressed by the greater power that the apostles had as the Word of God was unleashed all around him.

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We often forget that, that the word of God brings along with it the power of God. It is great to see

healings of body and evil defeated but that power comes from the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The message that if you turn from your sins, that if you come to him asking for forgiveness, you'll be washed clean. That's the message that Philip preached and that's what the Samaritans believe in. Not in the miracles. But in the message.

God is filling the early Church with excitement and he is building a bridge between long-time enemies as he does that. People who were once estranged now have a common faith. And so, the Church now has Hebrew speaking Jews, Greek speaking Jews and now even Samaritans. Now this is so unlikely, so strange in fact that when the news filters back to Jerusalem, they send their two most senior leaders, Peter and John to investigate.

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And when they come, they find something really strange. These people have accepted the word of God. They have believed in Jesus. They have been baptised but they haven't received God's promised Holy Spirit. Is this because this really is a two-stage process, as some Pentecostals and Catholics believe? Where someone believes and becomes a Christian but they need the apostolic touch or the laying on of hands to get the second blessing?

I don't think so because the consistent teaching of the NT as evidenced by Peter in Acts 2, is that when you believe and when you outwardly show that belief in baptism, then immediately you get the Holy Spirit. So why didn't it happen in this place? Why does it only happen when the apostles come to town and lay their hands on them?

I want to suggest to you that what's going on here is unique. And that the thing that makes it unique is that a very important boundary has just been crossed. And it's almost like crossing the border into Samaria is too big an event for the Apostles not to be in on. And so, it's a bit like when they finished North Connex a few months ago. Everything done. But they blocked the tunnel for a while until the Premier came for the official opening. And here both the Samaritans and the apostles get to see firsthand that God is doing something amazing for him. The Church is not to be just populated by Jews but Samaritans as well.

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The Church has become multicultural. God's people are not just from one race. For God is now bringing people from every nation together. How does the old children's chorus put it? *"Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world, red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world."*

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But what about Simon? ¹⁸*"When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money ¹⁹ & said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."* ²⁰*Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! Slide 18*

²¹*You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God.*

²²*Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness & captive to sin"*

This incident shows us how close a person can come to salvation and not be converted. Simon saw the miracles, heard the good news, professed faith in Jesus, and was baptized but was never saved. He looked saved but his heart was still captive to sin. He wanted the power to give the Holy Spirit to others more than he wanted the Holy Spirit himself. Slide 19

And friends that just reminds us that there will be people within our Churches who have heard the gospel, who do have a faith, who have been baptised, who do have an interest in spiritual things but may not be saved. They too might continue to dabble in the occult, they might think that they can buy God's favour through their money, their influence, maybe even their good works. Even leaders can be false teachers. We need to realise that Satan wants to stop the work of God and one way he does that is through infiltrating the Church.

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Spurgeon, the Prince of Preachers, started pastoring at the age of 16 but by the time he was 25 he had led his church to build and regularly a 5000-seat auditorium. And he preached all over Europe as well. At the same time, there was a great circus builder, P.T. Barnum who heard about Spurgeon & the great crowds coming out to hear him. He sent him a telegram with an offer of a large sum of money to come and preach in his circus tents. He would then charge admission and make a fortune. Spurgeon sent a short reply: Dear Mr. Barnum, you'll find my answer in Acts 8:20. Now the last person we see in this multicultural Church is the

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4. Eunuch of Ethiopia (verses 26-40)

He is most likely a black African, an important official, a God fearer who has taken this special pilgrimage to Jerusalem, covering 1800 kilometres up the Nile, along the desert sands of Sinai, and finally into the hill country of Judea to worship at the Temple. But he was a eunuch and so being a eunuch, he wouldn't have been able to enter the real Temple because being castrated prevented him from doing so. This man wanted to know the true and living God but he had been kept on the outside by the Jewish religion.

Now Philip had been successful in Samaria, people were becoming Christians right, left and centre but now the Spirit of God moved him away from all of that and took him onto a lonely desert road, where he met this Eunuch from Ethiopia. It was like God was saying to the Church, *"The Jews now have the Word, the Samaritans have the Word, and now it is time for the Word to go to the other races as well, starting with the God fearers."*

But wait a second, Philip has enough to do in Samaria, doesn't he? Revival has broken out. There are people everyone needing discipling. The word of God needs still to be preached doesn't it? Yes, but God moves Philip on. For he is moving in the heart of this Ethiopian.

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"This man... was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." ³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. ³¹ "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So, he invited Philip to come up and sit with him."

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Is this just a coincident or is this truly a God incident? Here is the right man, Philip, on the right road and he meets someone who happens to be reading the OT scriptures and needs help to understand. And look at the passage he is reading. ³² *"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."*

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God brings the threads together, doesn't he? This is a passage about Jesus. His death on the cross. The fact that he is dying for our sins. But this sacrificial life enables God to give us forgiveness and a fresh start. It's all there in Isaiah 53. God's providence brings this man to the good news of Jesus. And he believes on the spot, is baptised and as a quick as a flash the Spirit takes Philip away again. And the eunuch goes on his way rejoicing, without the evangelist but with the evangel, without human aid but with the divine spirit. And through this one man, the Ethiopian Orthodox church today numbers around 45 million believers.

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Do you see how God is causing the church to become multicultural? Hebrew Jews, Greek speaking Jews, Samaritans, now African Godfearers are amongst its numbers. All followers of Jesus. All one in Christ. For the gospel is not just for people like you and me, it is for all people. It is not just good news for the middle class but for sinners of any social status. It is not just for those who speak English, it is for people of every tribe and every language.

Now the members of the early Church knew that but they thought that they would stay where they were and the nations would come to them. In their minds the people would flock to Jerusalem and the Gentiles would become saved through the name of Jesus via going through the door of Judaism. But the persecution of the Church sent them packing. Out of their country and out of their comfort zone. And now they realise God's heart for the nations will now come about not by people coming in but by them going out.

I wonder if that is a lesson that we still need to learn today. God still wants the nations to come to Jesus and that will be done not by the nations coming through the doors of our Church but by us going out of the Church to the nations. By sending missionaries to every country. By reaching the people of the nations that now populate our cities. We are so multicultural as a society and now it is time for us become more multicultural as a Church.

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That's the great miracle taking place in Acts 8 and it is a miracle that God wants to make happen again today. *Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, black and white, rich and poor, together as one in Christ Jesus.* That's our calling. And to achieve His will God might even put a bomb under us to get us going. Out into the world calling people from all nations to come to Jesus Christ. Can we do that? We can but not on our own! Slide 27

<i>"I said, "Let me walk in the field"</i>	<i>He said: "No walk in the town."</i>
<i>I said: "There are no flowers there."</i>	<i>He said: "No flowers but a crown."</i>
<i>I said: "But the skies are black</i>	<i>There is nothing but noise and din."</i>
<i>And he wept as he sent me back -</i>	<i>"There is more", he said "There is sin."</i>
<i>I said: "But the air is thick,</i>	<i>And fogs are veiling the sun."</i>
<i>He answered: "Yet souls are sick</i>	<i>And souls in the dark undone!"</i>
<i>I said: "I will miss the light</i>	<i>And friends will miss me, they say."</i>
<i>He answered: "Chose tonight</i>	<i>If I am to miss you or they."</i>
<i>I pleaded for time to be given.</i>	<i>He said "Is it hard to decide?"</i>
<i>It will not seem so hard in Heaven</i>	<i>To have followed the steps of your Guide."</i>
<i>I cast one look at the fields</i>	<i>Then set my face to the town:</i>
<i>He said, "My child, do you yield?</i>	<i>Will you leave the flowers for the crown?"</i>
<i>Then into his hand went mine</i>	<i>And into my heart came He</i>
<i>And I walk in a light divine,</i>	<i>The path I had feared to see. (George MacDonald)</i>

