

Lesson 7



Where We're Going

By the end of this lesson, participants will understand that taking a bold stand for Christ may not be easy and may be very costly, but they will also learn that, per Scripture, honoring God and standing up for Christ pleases the Lord so much that they may get a standing ovation from the King of kings and the Lord of lords, Himself.



The Inheritance

Tears streamed down Kevin Williams' face as he sat with his hands cuffed to his chair in the small, cold room, waiting for his attorney to arrive. He was only 20 years old and he feared that his life was over. "I don't know what I was thinking," he whispered to himself as he shook his head back and forth.

Kevin looked up when he heard the door opening. "Good afternoon Mr. Williams," his public defender said in a solemn voice.

"My name is Roger Burman and I have been assigned to your case as your legal representative. Would you like to tell me what happened?" Kevin sat up straight and cleared his throat, desperately trying to swallow the lump that had formed. After a pause, Kevin answered, "First, I would like to tell you that I am a Christian and that I love the Lord. I lost control in a moment of rage but this is not who I really am. I just kind of lost it." Kevin's voice was trembling and Mr. Burman was leaning forward to hear every word. "Look son, I'm not your judge, I'm your lawyer. I just need to know what happened, from the beginning."

Kevin, failing to hold back the tears, told Mr. Burman everything. Kevin explained how he and his girlfriend had gotten into an argument over another guy who had been sending her text messages. The argument had gotten heated and she had tried to leave. He had told her not to go and when she tried to leave anyway, he grabbed her and shoved her into a door. Kevin told Mr. Burman that he had been momentarily blinded by an indescribable rage, and before he knew it, he had punched his girlfriend in the face.

She had fallen hard, so hard that she hadn't moved. She was still hospitalized. Kevin paused, debating whether to tell his lawyer that he grew up watching his father treat his mother like a punching bag. Kevin thought about how he watched his father beat his mother for many years before their divorce, and his father never spent a day behind bars. Thankfully, his mother is still alive and well. Kevin sighed slowly and decided that he had told Roger Burman everything he wanted him to know.



Real Talk

1. Kevin was facing consequences for his sinful actions. What keeps us from considering the consequences of our sinful actions before we commit them?
2. The Bible teaches us to be angry and sin not (Ephesians 4:26). What can we do when we become extremely angry so we don't sin against God the way the Jewish leaders did?
3. Throughout the New Testament, we see Jesus seated at the right hand of God (Hebrews 1:3, Hebrews 10:12, Colossians 3:1), but in this passage, Jesus was standing. What do you believe moved Jesus to give Stephen a standing ovation?



The Players

Blasphemy. The Greek word for "blasphemy" means "to slander" or "to speak lightly of the divine." In the New Testament, blasphemy indicated a hostile attitude toward God. In the epistle to the Romans, Paul quotes Isaiah who stated that God's name was blasphemed among the Gentiles because of the Jews (Romans 2:24, Isaiah 52:5). This confirms the importance of believers living in ways that bring praise to God rather than contempt for Him. It is worth noting that both Jesus and Stephen were condemned to death under the false charge of blasphemy. This occurred because Jesus claimed the prerogatives that belong to God alone, and Stephen accused the unbelieving Jews of murdering the long-awaited Messiah.



Backstage

Jesus knew that the Gospel of the Kingdom would be preached to all nations. He knew that truth, armed with the omnipotence of the Holy Spirit, would prevail in the battle with evil and that the bloodstained banner would one day wave triumphantly over His followers.

As Christ's earthly ministry drew to a close, He knew He would soon leave His disciples to carry on the work without His personal supervision. He sought to encourage them and to prepare them for the future. He did not deceive them with false hopes. He knew He was about to be separated from them—to leave them as sheep among



Make It Stick

“As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’” (Acts 7:59, NLT)



The Word (NLT)

Acts 7:51 “You stubborn people! You are heathen at heart and deaf to the truth. Must you forever resist the Holy Spirit? That’s what your ancestors did, and so do you!”

52 Name one prophet your ancestors didn’t persecute! They even killed the ones who predicted the coming of the Righteous One—the Messiah whom you betrayed and murdered.

53 You deliberately disobeyed God’s law, even though you received it from the hands of angels.”

54 The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen’s accusation, and they shook their fists at him in rage.

55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God’s right hand.

56 And he told them, “Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God’s right hand!”

57 Then they put their hands over their ears and began shouting. They rushed at him

58 and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. His accusers took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul.

59 As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

60 He fell to his knees, shouting, “Lord, don’t charge them with this sin!” And with that, he died.

8:1a Saul was one of the witnesses, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen.

wolves. He knew they would suffer persecution, be cast out of the synagogues, and be thrown into prison for proclaiming Him as the Messiah. In speaking of their future, Jesus said some of them would be killed. He knew that in their coming trials they would remember His words and be strengthened to believe in Him as the Redeemer.

Are you prepared to stand up for your faith, regardless of the consequences as demonstrated by Stephen in today’s lesson?



Combing Through

1. The Conclusion of Stephen’s Defense (Acts 7:51–53)

The beginning of chapter 7 opens with Stephen’s brilliant defense of what he believed, which was really a review of the history of the people of Israel. He begins by appealing to the memory of Abraham. He describes Abraham as a man of longtime faith who dared to change his life in obedience to God, leaving his country and even his father’s house to go into a land he had never seen before. Though he was old and childless, Abram (renamed Abraham) believed God would give him descendants.

The next man on Stephen’s list was Joseph. Joseph was a man of faith who obeyed God and had every one of God’s promises to him fulfilled. Stephen contrasts Joseph with members of the Sanhedrin, who refused to obey God because they feared the changes that doing so would bring in their lives and in their levels of affluence.

Next, Stephen spoke of Moses, whom they had accused him of blaspheming. Stephen argued that Moses failed when he acted according to what seemed right in his own eyes and according to his own wisdom. But when God appeared, then instructed and empowered him, Moses went back to Egypt and became a ruler and deliverer. He answers their charge by quoting Moses himself: “God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among your own people” (Acts 7:37, NLT; see Deuteronomy 18:15). In other words, Moses himself had said things would change. God was going to raise up another prophet who, like Moses, would teach the people a whole new way of life in God. The prophet whom Moses spoke of was Jesus, the man they had put to death and were now rejecting.

Stephen answered the second charge regarding the Temple by quoting from Isaiah: “Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest? Hath not my hand made all these things?” (Acts 7:49–50, KJV; see Isaiah 66:1–2). No building can contain God. God is the Creator of all things.

After answering their charges, Stephen levels a charge of his own: “You stubborn people! You are heathen at heart and deaf to the truth. Must you forever resist the Holy Spirit? That’s what your ancestors did, and so do you!” (Acts 7:51, NLT). These Jews were stubborn—they would not bow to God’s will. They had what the KJV refers to as “uncircumcised hearts,” meaning their hearts were insensitive to the grace and glory of God. They refused to repent. Just as their forefathers had persecuted and murdered the prophets who prophesied of Jesus, these Jews had betrayed and murdered the Christ.

2. The Death of Stephen (vv. 53–8:1a)

Stephen’s accusers and the religious leaders were so outraged by this truth that they could not stand it. “The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen’s accusation, and they shook their fists at him in rage” (Acts 7:54, NLT). In contrast to his accusers, who were driven wild by their passions, Stephen continued to look to God: “But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God’s right hand” (v. 55, NLT). These words are almost identical to the words Jesus had spoken to these men just a few years earlier: “You have said it. And in the future you will see the Son of Man seated in the place of power at God’s right hand” (Matthew 26:64, NLT). When they heard this, they knew the issue was not Stephen but Jesus.

They had brought Stephen to trial, and he condemned them with the very Scriptures they professed to believe. Like the men of the synagogue, they could not argue with his testimony. Consequently, these enraged Jews cried out at the top of their voices and put their hands up to their ears in a vain attempt to drown out Stephen. When confronted with the truth of Christ, one must either submit or resist. The Jewish leaders and Stephen’s accusers decided to resist. Like their forefathers, instead of heeding the words of God’s prophet, they would kill him. The respectable Sanhedrin turned into an unruly mob, rushed at Stephen, and dragged him outside the city gates. They threw him down into a pit and stoned him.

The reference to the “witness” (Acts 7:58, KJV) suggests that the stoning was carried out as a legal execution. The penalty for blasphemy was stoning (Leviticus 24:16). According to Jewish Law, the witnesses would have to throw the first stones (Deuteronomy 17:7). Acts 7:58 says that

these men took off their outer cloaks and laid them at the feet of a young Jewish Pharisee named Saul.

After the witnesses had thrown the first stones, the rest of the congregation picked up stones and hurled them at Stephen. If someone had a good aim and managed to hit Stephen in the head early on, he would lose consciousness and would not have to endure the prolonged agony. If not, his death would be long, slow, and very painful.

As the malicious and unforgiving crowd threw their stones down on Stephen, he first cried out in prayer for God to receive his spirit. Then, he dropped to his knees and uttered his final words, "Lord, don't charge them with this sin!" (Acts 7:60, NLT). Stephen, the first recorded Christian martyr, died at the hands of the same people who had delivered Jesus to be crucified, and he died with a similar prayer on his lips.

The King James Version translates that Stephen "fell asleep" (Acts 7:60; also see John 11:11). Because physical death is temporary for

the believer, death is referred to as sleep. The body sleeps, but the spirit goes to be with the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:12–19). God never wastes the blood of His saints. The persecution that began with Stephen's murder forced many in the Church to flee Jerusalem and take the Gospel to the furthest parts of the then-known world. And a young man named Saul, who gave his approval to the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1), was so moved by Stephen's death that he never forgot it. Although Saul would become the greatest persecutor of the early Church, Stephen's death would always remain in his mind. There is little doubt that the Holy Spirit used Stephen's message and glorious death to prepare Saul for his meeting with the risen Lord on the Damascus Road (Acts 9). Saul, later called Paul, would become the single greatest evangelist the world has ever known.

Stories of martyrdom are continually written today with tales of others who are called to lay down their lives for Jesus' sake.



Diving Deeper Quiz

1. What do you believe Stephen said that caused the Jewish leaders to become so violently enraged?
2. What was the physical reaction of the Jewish leaders we see in the text that lets us know how furious they were?
3. The Bible says that while Stephen was being stoned, he prayed. What did he pray? Would you have prayed? If so, what do you think you would have prayed?
4. Name the ways that Stephen's response to the Jewish leaders was similar to Jesus' response to the Jewish people as He was being crucified.



Next Steps

1. Reflect on something you need to take a stand for whether an issue, an injustice, a group of people or something else. How do you need to take a stand?

2. Pray for believers around the world who are still being persecuted for their faith, especially in nations where there isn't freedom of religion.



Say Word?

Disposition. dis-puh-ZISH-un.

Uncircumcised. un-SUR-kuhm-sized.

SWAG

(Spiritual Wisdom and Guidance)

Now the true soldiers of Christ must always be prepared to do battle for the truth, and must never, so far as lies with them, allow false convictions to creep in.—Origen





FAITH

“Type Faith”

Adapted from a Spoken Word Poem by Chriska Francois

A brown man taught me how to love and He taught me about faith, too.

On a Friday night, He was tragically killed by a brutal state-sanctioned force for “crimes” he did not commit.

Left to die there in cold blood, his body hung lifelessly before his weeping mother.

Back then, Calvary trees did bear **strange** fruit.

He died a living sacrifice.

The Ultimate Martyr for the benefit of all. And all He ever asked for was our faith. In Him. In Love. In the mountain-moving, overflowing, miracle-working, revolutionary, and **soul-saving** power resting in His pierced hands.

But we want **safe** Jesus.

We want a sweet by and by in the sanctity of our own hearts and **silence** in the face of skeptics.

We want prayers answered but doubt every chance we get.

We sit 21st century Jesus in a cute little box decorated with our every **wish**.

We are a generation clinging to faith by a thread....

Yet, we're trapped in 21st century strait jackets threaded in skepticism and laced in fair-weather Christian faith.

Yet, we're searching for God in places we need not...as He stands, pierced hands, open wide.

Yet, we're too blind to see the same brown man who casted out demons, walked on water, and healed with the touch of His hand is the same One we bow before today.

Whatever happened to that “I won't go unless your presence goes with me” type faith?

That “I'd rather be burned alive than to bow before your idols” type faith?

That “PUT ME IN A LION'S DEN, IF YOU WANT TO” type faith?

That “ran my biological clock but still expecting” type faith?

That “come against giants... with a **SLINGSHOT**” type faith?

That “I don't see the promised land, I don't see it, but Lord....I'll walk” type faith?

I want a throwback type faith.

That old-school faith you could feel in your **bones**.
The type that made aunty jump in circles in the church.
That sit in your prayer closet and pour out your heart.
That never woulda made it without you.
That—“this is my last dollar, Lord, be my last dream.”
That, “everything is in shambles all around me, Father, but I still trust you”.
That “persecuted but not abandoned, struck down but not destroyed”.
I won’t settle for a Sunday morning and done type faith.

I want to **see**. And **touch**. And **hear**. And **taste** the goodness of God 25/8.

These hands, they **WILL heal**, **WILL bless**, **WILL** be lifted to praise the Lord.

The **sea-splitting**, earth-moving, life-breathing, King of kings and Lord of lords!

The Name above all names, worthy of **ALL** our praise.

The One to whom every knee will bow and every tongue shall confess.

The One who was, and is, and is to come.

The only God in history that ever came down in human form and humbled himself to relate to me.

So if anyone should ever ask, a brown man taught me how to love, and he taught me about faith, too.



Lesson 8





Where We're Going

We will learn that sin can hinder a person from receiving God's power, understand the importance of following Christ with the correct motives, and reflect on our own relationship with Christ and the authenticity of our walk with Him.



Favors vs. Favor

It was an unusually hot, humid April day. Justin wiped the sweat from his brow, turned to David, and said, "I hope this ride is worth the wait in this long line." The two friends had decided to go to the local amusement park while they were still on spring break.

Justin asked, "How much longer do you think the wait will be?" David pointed to a sign directly above Justin's head and said, "According to this sign, the wait is 30 minutes from this point." Justin sighed and said, "I think we've been in this line about 30 minutes already, but I won't complain. It's not like we have anything else to do."

After a few minutes passed, while laughing and talking, a couple of young ladies hurriedly ran by them. Justin looked puzzled and asked, "Where did they come from and where are they going?" David pointed up again. The big yellow and black sign read, "BY-PASS."

"What's that?" Justin asked, still puzzled. David explained, "When you buy a ticket, you have the option of buying what's called a By-pass. If you get one, you can leave and return at specific times and not have to stand in long lines like the rest of us. Pass buyers get to go straight to the front of the lines."

After deliberating for a few seconds, Justin responded, "I don't think that's fair. What if you can't afford a By-pass? It doesn't seem right that money can buy you favors and special treatment like By-passes and first class seats! Does that mean the rest of us are second-class?"

"Why are you yelling at me?" David asked, still laughing. "You know this is just the world we live in. In many cases money is power. It buys influence and special treatment. But money can't buy what's most important, which is salvation and a personal relationship with God. You and I would've never been able to afford the price of these things. Yet the price was paid and the gift is ours."

"You're right," Justin said. "And not only are you right, but we're up next on the roller coaster! Hallelujah!"



Real Talk

1. What are your personal motivations for following Christ? Have you ever prayed for revelation on this?
2. What was Justin upset about? Have you ever been upset about something similar?
3. Do you believe money is the greatest power in our society? Why or why not?



The Players

Sorcery. In *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, sorcery is defined as "the practice of the occult arts under the power of evil spirits or demons and has been common in all ages of the world's history" (1039). In this country, we are more familiar with a type of magic that is simply sleight of hand, using such tricks as hiding cards up the sleeve or drawing attention away from the hand doing the trick. But there is another magic that is drawn from the power of evil spirits. For example, the practitioner may actually do things that are not within the realm of the everyday laws of physics.

In today's Scripture, we will be reading about Simon the sorcerer, who called upon these occult arts to do such wonders that people held him in great awe. Simon took upon himself the title of "the great one."

In many traditional cultures in Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Europe, sorcerers scare people. If people do not sacrifice chickens and other animals and items, the sorcerer invokes fear that evil spirits might hurt them. And all along, the sorcerer is getting rich from the sacrifices. All through the Bible, magical arts are condemned because of their connection with evil spirits and because they lead people to do terrible things out of fear, including sacrificing their own children.



Backstage

The Book of Acts is a book of history and faith. In addition to providing a transition between the Gospels and the Epistles, Luke, the writer of Acts gives us the vital historical facts of how Christianity began and spread. In Acts, selected events in church history are recorded that demonstrate Christian doctrine and practice. Clearly, it is through the power of the Holy Spirit that the men and women of God are able to testify that Jesus is the Christ. There is great emphasis on the connection between the Old Testament, the Jews, and



Make It Stick

“When Simon saw that the Spirit was given when the apostles laid their hands on people, he offered them money to buy this power.” (Acts 8:18, NLT)



The Word (NLT)

Acts 8:9 A man named Simon had been a sorcerer there for many years, amazing the people of Samaria and claiming to be someone great.

10 Everyone, from the least to the greatest, often spoke of him as “the Great One—the Power of God.”

11 They listened closely to him because for a long time he had astounded them with his magic.

12 But now the people believed Philip’s message of Good News concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. As a result, many men and women were baptized.

13 Then Simon himself believed and was baptized. He began following Philip wherever he went, and he was amazed by the signs and great miracles Philip performed.

14 When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that the people of Samaria had accepted God’s message, they sent Peter and John there.

15 As soon as they arrived, they prayed for these new believers to receive the Holy Spirit.

16 The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them, for they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

17 Then Peter and John laid their hands upon these believers, and they received the Holy Spirit.

18 When Simon saw that the Spirit was given when the apostles laid their hands on people, he offered them money to buy this power.

19 “Let me have this power, too,” he exclaimed, “so that when I lay my hands on people, they will receive the Holy Spirit!”

20 But Peter replied, “May your money be destroyed with you for thinking God’s gift can be bought!”

21 You can have no part in this, for your heart is not right with God.

22 Repent of your wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive your evil thoughts.

23 For I can see that you are full of bitter jealousy and are held captive by sin.”

24 “Pray to the Lord for me,” Simon exclaimed, “that these terrible things you’ve said won’t happen to me!”

Christianity. There is an even greater emphasis that salvation is not bound by a believer’s race or ethnicity; rather, it is extended to all humankind. In Acts, it is clear that it is only Jesus, the Christ, who is able to fulfill the needs of the Gentiles and the Jews.



Combing Through

1. Introducing Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8:9–11)

Today’s Scripture passage begins in the midst of a great evangelistic campaign in Samaria. After the stoning of Stephen, believers, except for the apostles, scattered everywhere while spreading the Gospel. Philip, one of the deacons who was appointed along with Stephen, went to Samaria and began preaching and performing miraculous signs. Because of his witness, many came to Christ. Simon the sorcerer was among the Samaritans who heard Philip’s preaching and saw the accompanying signs and wonders. Simon had enjoyed tremendous popularity among the Samaritans. Scripture tells us that Simon had been practicing the magical arts and had deceived many with his false claims of greatness. Simon’s abilities as a magician had “bewitched the people” (Acts 8:9, KJV).

Even today, people mistakenly believe that the only difference between magic and miracles is that the latter is more impressive and is practiced by Christians. The truth is far more important. Miracles clearly point to God, while magic manipulates and points away from God. Faith comes through hearing the Word and not through seeing miracles.

2. Many Turn to Christ (vv. 12–13)

The Samaritans had previously believed in Simon because of his magic. They had no faith in Simon; rather, their belief was predicated on his magical abilities. Through the preaching of Philip, the faith of the Samaritans was based on the Good News of Jesus, the Christ, and the kingdom of God. The Samaritans saw Philip’s miracles as confirmation of the truth of the resurrection of Christ. The miracles aided—not caused—their faith. Now that faith in Jesus was the basis of their belief, they turned away from Simon. Even Simon himself believed and was baptized.

3. The Believers Receive the Holy Spirit (vv. 14–17)

When news of Philip’s successful ministry in Samaria reached Jerusalem, the apostles immediately dispatched Peter and John to Samaria. That these two elder statesmen were sent to Samaria should not be misread. There was no lack of faith on the part of the church in Philip’s ability to preach salvation. This fact is apparent when we see that Peter and John did not preach in Samaria.

Instead, they prayed and laid hands on the Samaritan converts. As a result, God gave the Samaritans the gift of the Holy Spirit. The sending of Peter and John is better understood in light of who the Samaritans were. They were a mixed-race people with some Jewish lineage but possessed an alternative style of worship. They shared some of the same beliefs as the Jews: They claimed an Abrahamic lineage and they were also awaiting a Messiah. By sending Peter and John, the church in Jerusalem was affirming its unity with the emerging church in Samaria.

The impartation of the Holy Spirit ensured the unity of the church. The Holy Spirit also provided a witness in the form of the apostles Peter and John. The apostles were credible and authoritative witnesses to the Jews that the acceptance of Samaritans into the church was equal to that of the Jews.

The fact that the apostles “laid their hands” on the Samaritan converts is no evidence that this was the only way for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17). On the Day of Pentecost, there was no mention of laying on of hands, yet the Holy Spirit was imparted to all of the disciples who were present and believing. Additionally, when Peter preached to Cornelius’ household, there is no mention of laying on of hands to receive the Spirit (Acts 10:44).

There is also little scriptural evidence that the twelve apostles were the only men empowered to impart the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands. When Paul, formerly Saul of Tarsus, was converted, it was Ananias who laid hands on him so that Paul might be healed and receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17–18). Ananias was neither an apostle nor a deacon. Instead, the laying on of hands and the receipt of the Holy Spirit by the Samaritans at the hands of the apostles marked a critical breakdown of religious and racial barriers. Philip had already baptized the believing Samaritans; thus, they were already saved. The apostles now witnessed the inclusiveness of the church. They saw that God was giving these Samaritans the exact same gift of the Holy Spirit that He had given to the apostles and disciples in Jerusalem. There was no barrier between the believing Jews and the believing Samaritans. There was one faith, one baptism, and one Spirit (see Ephesians 4:4–6).

4. Simon Attempts to Buy the Power of the Holy Spirit (vv. 18–24)

Superstitious Simon wanted to be able to impress people again with his magical powers, but he did not understand that the gift of the Holy Spirit is freely given to all who believe. Earlier, we

read that Simon believed and was baptized. At this point, we wonder whether his profession of faith was genuine. When Simon saw Peter and John laying hands on people to receive the Holy Spirit, he wanted this same power for himself, and he was ready to pay for it.

Peter saw through Simon right away. This was definitely not a genuine desire for spiritual power. In his heart was a desire to have center stage, and this is the opposite of what God desires to see in us. God wants us to give Him preeminence. Many people today are confused about paying for spiritual blessings. God is not like the waiter who gives you better service if you tip better. Even our good works will not

open the door of heaven for us. In Ephesians 2:8–9 (KJV), we read: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.” Every gift we receive from God is just that—a gift! Even our spiritual gifts are free from our heavenly Father (Ephesians 4:7–13).

We would like to see a happy ending to this story recorded in Acts 8, but it’s not there. Instead of Simon praying to God in deep repentance, he asked Peter to pray for him that the punishment for his sins would not fall on him. In other words, Simon was not sorry for his sins; he just wanted to get off the hook from the punishment.



Diving Deeper Quiz

1. Where do you believe Simon got the power to perform his magic?
2. Why do you think Simon wanted to have the power to give people the Holy Spirit?
3. The Scripture says that Simon believed Philip’s message about Christ and was therefore baptized. In your opinion, what do you think convinced him that he could buy God’s power?
4. When Peter rebuked Simon, he addressed his motive—the intent of his heart. Why is the actual reason we follow Christ so important to God?



Next Steps

1. Reflect on your motives for participating in church. Are you pursuing relationship with God or there for another reason?
2. Think about how you can be more vulnerable with God in prayer. Is there an area of your life you are hesitant to invite God into?



Say Word?

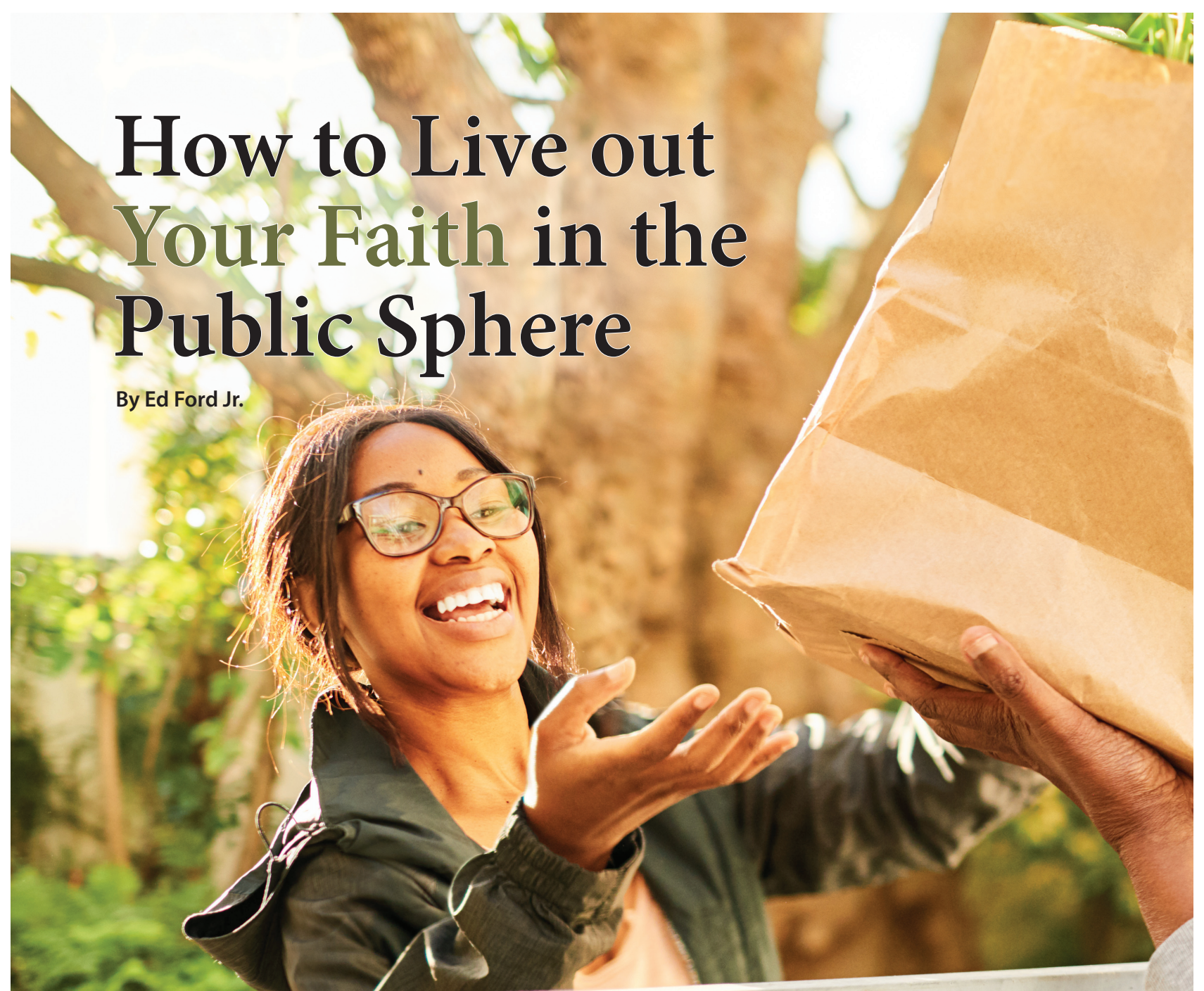
Simony. SI-muh-nee.
Sorcery. SOR-suh-ree.

SWAG
(Spiritual Wisdom and Guidance)

You just have to be authentic. You can’t fake a smile. You have to do what you actually enjoy.—Charli D’Amelio



HOLY BIBLE



How to Live out Your Faith in the Public Sphere

By Ed Ford Jr.

As a Christian, you may ask yourself at times how to live out your faith in the public sphere. Injustices are occurring in the world around us every day. Because your faith doesn't allow you to ignore these happenings, you might feel a strong desire from within to take productive action. Some people choose to take harmful action but your desire is to take action that heals, that works towards justice and that shows God's love for humanity. This is what we should aim to do, and my goal is to help you begin to think of ways you can live out your faith while having a positive impact on the world around you.

We are called to live out our faith and have an impact on society. A verse in the scriptures that reiterates this calling is Micah 6:8, which says "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" In this verse Micah points out what God requires of us. We are to do Justice. How are we "to do Justice"? What does that mean for us? Justice comes in differ-

ent forms. We can do Justice by lending help to the parent who is struggling to put food on the table and is earning just enough to put a roof over their children's heads. We can lend our help by offering to buy them groceries, maybe filling up their car with gas or connecting them to resources that can give them financial assistance and build their credit. We can do justice by assisting the homeless in our community to find shelter and get them connected to resources that will supply them with food and daily necessities. We can do justice by giving our time, talent and treasure to community organizations that give back to youth, those who are less fortunate and those who are struggling to make it each day.

These are some ways we can do justice on an individual basis. To those who already do such acts regularly, I commend you. Continue this good work. However, there's also a need for justice on a systemic level within our society. As Christians, we are to follow the example of Christ, and stand beside those who are looked down on and mistreated by society. We have the capability to



“[Christ] advocated for those who were hungry, sick, outcasts and shamed. He even advocated for you before you were born so that you may have life more abundantly. If you use your time and energy each day advocating for justice, you are advocating for those who are facing current circumstances as well as generations to come. Remember, to do justice is to take action that creates a society where everyone has the opportunities, tools and resources to fulfill their God-given potential.”



do justice on a systemic level by advocating for changes within our systems. We should advocate for opportunities for disadvantaged youth. Whether that be through mentorship programs, academic tutoring, pouring more resources into historically underfunded schools and giving families more choices as to where their child can attend. We should advocate for those who are battling unfair sentences in the justice system and creating opportunities for those who have paid their debt to society, in an effort to reduce recidivism rates. We should aim to provide more accessible opportunities for employment, educational opportunities, and programs for financial and civic literacy once they are released. More people should focus on advocating for those struggling with mental health issues and substance abuse. These are initiatives that would exhibit justice as Micah 6:8 led us to do.

Our participation in advocating for policy and systemic change in the public sphere is crucial. Many people believe their voice doesn't matter, and as a result they don't bother to vote or advo-

cate for change. I can understand why many feel this way. However, inaction by good hearted people doesn't get us further towards justice at all. Our government is supposed to be by and for the people. That means we the people of the United States have a voice and can move our government through civic engagement to reform laws and systems to deliver true justice. We can have a great impact especially on a local level. For example, after the terrible deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor many cities across the country were pressed by citizens to take action against not only police brutality but racial injustice on a broad systemic level. That means in education, voting, criminal justice, and especially public health as the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the inequities in our health care system. With much to be addressed U.S. cities and state governments passed their own policies in an attempt to tackle racial injustice. In my home City of Middletown, CT where I am a member of the City Council, we decided to establish a Task Force on Anti-Racism. This Task Force was given the charge to find policy solutions to systemic racism



wherever it exists under our jurisdiction. My colleagues and I received numerous emails from residents calling for change. The establishment of the Task Force was a response to residents' call to action and would be the beginning of furthering justice within our own community. This is one example of how people can make a difference and move our government from stagnation and lip service to action and moving in the right direction. I encourage you to believe that your voice matters. Someone is waiting for you to stand up for the cause of justice.

With myriad issues that need to be addressed it's easy to feel overwhelmed. You don't have to figure out how you will be an advocate for all of them. I encourage you to look at the example of Christ. He advocated for those who were hungry, sick, outcasts and shamed. He even advocated for you before you were born so that you may have life more abundantly. If you use your time and energy each day advocating for justice, you are advocating for those who are facing current circumstances as well as

generations to come. Remember, to do justice is to take action that creates a society where everyone has the opportunities, tools and resources to fulfill their God-given potential. Justice can be restorative instead of further tearing individuals down.

I focused in the previous passages on how we "do justice." However, those actions are to love kindness and walk humbly as well. When we reach out our hand to help and advocate for others who society would rather turn their backs on, we extend kindness. When we set aside our pride and consider the circumstances of others instead of solely focusing on our own, we begin to walk humbly. I challenge you to think about what issues in your community you can begin to advocate for that would further the cause of justice. What Town Hall meetings can you attend to advocate for justice? What issues can you write your Legislator or Mayor about? If you don't know who these individuals are, I encourage you to research them. As you begin to walk in the requirements of Micah 6:8, you will be living out your faith in the public sphere.

Lesson 9





Where We're Going

We will understand that God wants us to be available to help others understand the Scriptures and recognize that God wants all cultures and ethnic groups to learn about Jesus.



God Speaks in Many Ways

As soon as Annette walked through the door, her mother asked, "How was the church service this evening?" "It was amazing!" Annette said. She was beaming and hardly able to contain her joy and excitement. This was the first night of a three-day youth revival at their church. Annette had been looking forward to it for weeks and had prayed that God would speak to her and give her a word of direction for this season of her life.

Her mother continued to quiz. "Did God speak to you?"

"Did He ever!" Annette squealed. "Mom, you know that I have been praying, asking God for direction and clarity. Tonight God used the young woman that preached the sermon to answer my questions. It was like she was speaking personally to me."

"That's so wonderful! I've been praying for you," Annette's mom replied. Annette took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Mom, can I confess something?"

"Sure baby," her mother said while looking up with loving, reassuring eyes.

"Mom, when they introduced the guest preacher, I was shocked to see it was an Asian woman. I was wondering where in the world they found her. I know a few Asians, but I've never seen one in church, and I certainly never heard one preach. I judged her and didn't expect to get much out of the sermon. To my surprise, I was so blessed by her message that I was doubly convicted. I had to repent on the way home. I guess God had to show me my own prejudices and teach me that He can use someone from a different background to speak to me on His behalf."

Annette's mother smiled and said, "Baby, it sounds like God spoke to you in many ways at the revival. Make sure you honor Him and put into practice all the lessons you've learned tonight."



Real Talk

1. Have you ever considered that God may want to send you to someone of a different race or culture to share the Good News of Jesus Christ? What would be your concerns?
2. Do you study the Bible in such a way that God can use you if He needs a person to explain His Word to someone else (2 Timothy 2:15)?
3. Have you ever led someone to Christ? If not, are you prepared to if the opportunity arose?



The Players

Eunuchs. Throughout the Bible, there are references to royal attendants appointed by kings as official caretakers of queens, harems, and women (Esther 2:3, 12–15). Those eunuchs, who served with distinction, were able to rise in rank within the royal households. The Assyrians and the pharaohs of Egypt were known to have minor officials in their court who often served as trustees of the royal assets. While the term is often literal, referring to men who have been physically castrated, this was not always the case. The term "eunuchs" was also used to denote officials who were assigned to duties in the courts of kings. Because the Ethiopian man referenced in today's lesson was a proselyte, or Gentile who has converted to Judaism, to the Jewish religion, we may deduce that he was not castrated because the Mosaic Law would not have allowed him to become a part of the congregation of God's people (Deuteronomy 23:1).



Backstage

In the Book of Acts, the story of Philip's evangelistic effort serves as a transition between the ministries of Peter and Paul. The account of Paul describes how God adds to the church through his bold and relentless preaching. Philip is in the middle of the record of these two great statesmen; Philip's efforts add to the church soul by soul.

We see Philip first serving as an elected deacon in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:5). His effective witnessing efforts are described in Acts 8:4–25, which shows how they fulfill Jesus' Great Commission to spread the Gospel from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth.



Make It Stick

“As they rode along, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, ‘Look! There’s some water! Why can’t I be baptized?’” (Acts 8:36, NLT)



The Word (NLT)

Acts 8:26 As for Philip, an angel of the Lord said to him, “Go south down the desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza.”

27 So he started out, and he met the treasurer of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under the Kandake, the queen of Ethiopia. The eunuch had gone to Jerusalem to worship,

28 and he was now returning. Seated in his carriage, he was reading aloud from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

29 The Holy Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and walk along beside the carriage.”

30 Philip ran over and heard the man reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

31 The man replied, “How can I, unless someone instructs me?” And he urged Philip to come up into the carriage and sit with him.

32 The passage of Scripture he had been reading was this: “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter. And as a lamb is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth.

33 He was humiliated and received no justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.”

34 The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, was the prophet talking about himself or someone else?”

35 So beginning with this same Scripture, Philip told him the Good News about Jesus.

***36** As they rode along, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “Look! There’s some water! Why can’t I be baptized?”

38 He ordered the carriage to stop, and they went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing.



Combing Through

1. Philip Obeys the Spirit (Acts 8:26–29)

Acts 8 focuses on two great missionary efforts by Philip. In the first, Philip, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, has preached Christ, which led to the conversion of the Samaritans. The receipt of the Holy Spirit by the Samaritans verifies his success with spreading the Good News from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria.

The Spirit then directs Philip on another mission. We are told that an angel of the Lord directs Philip to go down from Jerusalem to Gaza (Acts 8:26, NLT). In Acts, the writer (Luke) presupposes that Jerusalem is ground zero for church activities, implying that Philip has returned to Jerusalem from Samaria. Philip was now directed southwest into the desert. Initially, Philip was not told what to do in Gaza. However, this lack of information did not stop him. He was obedient to the word from God and immediately obeyed. We should note that while Peter and Paul are noted for their great preaching ability, Philip was outstanding in the area of obedience. Whenever the Spirit directed him, Philip heeded. Because he was so sensitive to the direction of the Holy Spirit, it is clear that prayer and the study of God’s Word must have been integral parts of Philip’s life. How much more effective would Christians be today if we were more sensitive and obedient to the Holy Spirit?

On the road, Philip encountered a fellow traveler. Scripture tells us four important things about this man. First, we are told that he was a man from Ethiopia. Native Ethiopians were Black people. The man was from a distant country located along the upper Nile. At this time in history, Ethiopia was located in the area we now know as Sudan. We then learn that he is a eunuch in the court of Candace, queen of Ethiopia, and “had the charge of all her treasure.” Finally, we’re told that he had come to Jerusalem to worship.

Biblical scholars provide varied interpretations of what it means that the Ethiopian man was a eunuch. One group takes the position that the term “eunuch” designates that he was a government official. They also say he was a circumcised Jewish proselyte. This group uses as proof the fact that he was in Jerusalem to worship. Temple worship dictated both his Jewish conversion and his circumcision. Others believed that because the man was in the service of a queen, the Ethiopian had been castrated. If this second theory were correct, Mosaic Law would have prohibited him from joining “the congregation of the LORD” (Deuteronomy 23:1).

2. Philip Witnesses in the Spirit (vv. 29–35)

The Gaza road was well traveled; certainly, other chariots had passed Philip. The Spirit directs Philip to “Go near, and join thyself to this chariot” (v. 29). This was no chance meeting. Philip was being purposefully led by the Holy Spirit to be with this man at this time. In this way, Philip was like Jesus. He did not mind leaving the crowds behind to deal with one lost soul. Notice Philip’s zeal: He ran to the Ethiopian’s chariot. Philip recognized the seriousness of his missionary work. Do we move quickly to assist in the salvation of the lost?

Because the Ethiopian eunuch was reading from the Book of Isaiah, we can safely assume that this man took the religion of Judaism seriously. Ethiopia was one of the areas among which the Jews were scattered after the Babylonian conquest (Isaiah 11:11). The eunuch may have had contact with Jews in Ethiopia or in nearby Egypt, where a great many Jews settled. Similarly, the fact that he could read Greek could be explained by the fact that from the time of Ptolemy II (306–246 B.C.), the Ethiopian kingdom had become partially Hellenized, or made to reflect Greek culture.

The custom of the time was to read Scripture aloud. Upon hearing the Ethiopian man reading, Philip asked if he understood what he was reading. In Acts 8:31 he said, in effect, “How can I unless someone shows me the way?” The eunuch was confused by what he was reading and needed someone to explain the Scripture to him. The man’s sincerity and willingness to learn were demonstrated by his invitation to Philip to come into the chariot and sit with him. Like many people today, the Ethiopian eunuch earnestly sought the truth, but he lacked saving faith in Jesus Christ and needed someone to show him the way. We must recognize that God could have allowed an angel to explain the Scripture to him but instead commissioned Philip. Similarly, Jesus has commissioned, ordered, and instructed each and every Christian to share the Gospel with others.

The Ethiopian had been reading from Isaiah 53, a passage describing the humiliation and suffering of the servant of God. He wanted to know, “Tell me, was the prophet talking about himself or someone else?” (v. 34, NLT). The Holy Spirit had been preparing Philip for this very moment. Philip “opened his mouth, and . . . preached unto him Jesus” (v. 35, KJV). Philip explained that the prophet Isaiah was describing Jesus, the Christ. The eunuch had no doubt heard a great deal about this Jesus while in Jerusalem.

3. The Ethiopian Confesses Christ (vv. 36–39)

During his preaching, Philip had probably talked about baptism. As soon as they came to a body of water, the eunuch asked if there was any hindrance to his being baptized right on the spot. Notice that Philip did not drill the Ethiopian on his knowledge and understanding of the Scripture. Philip simply asked him if he believed that Jesus was the Son of God. In other words, did he have faith? Obviously, at least to Philip, there were no impediments to this man's baptism. Upon the Ethiopian's simple confession of faith, "I believe," Philip

recognized the man was prepared to be placed under the lordship of Jesus and incorporated into the church (some early manuscripts do not have v. 37). Philip and the man entered the water, and the Ethiopian was baptized. At this moment, another prophecy of Isaiah was being fulfilled. This prophecy spoke of strangers, eunuchs, and other outcasts who would be given an "everlasting name" and called God's people: "The Lord GOD, which gathereth the outcasts of Israel saith; Yet will I gather others to him, beside those that are gathered unto him" (Isaiah 56:8).



Diving Deeper Quiz

1. Thinking solely about the Ethiopian eunuch's ethnicity and background, what challenges may he have had to overcome in going to Jerusalem to worship?
2. The eunuch was having trouble understanding the Scriptures, so the Holy Spirit sent Philip. Was Philip successful in explaining the Scriptures? Support your answer with Scripture.
3. What do you believe was the significance of Philip's encounter with the eunuch?
4. How does it make you feel that God would send Philip all the way to Gaza to save one soul? What does that teach us about God?



Next Steps

1. Reflect on encounters you have had with people of other cultures. Have you shown kindness and interest or fear and distrust?
2. Pray about any prejudices you may have to other people and let the Holy Spirit help you to overcome them.



Say Word?

Uncircumcised. uh-n-SUR-kuhm-sized.
Eunuch. YOU-nook

SWAG

(Spiritual Wisdom and Guidance)

Vulnerability is the birthplace of connection and the path to the feeling of worthiness. If it doesn't feel vulnerable, the sharing is probably not constructive.—Brene Brown

