

“If *Only*...”
Acts 1:8-25
Series: Book of Acts, #08
Pastor Lyle L. Wahl
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Theme: **God’s Blessing Depends On Faithfulness, Not Circumstances.**

Introduction

“If only ...” How many times do we hear those two words?

- “*If only*... I had a better job, more money, a nicer home, a newer car, *then* I would be happier, more content.”
- “If only life wasn’t so busy, then I could have more time for God, my spiritual life and God’s work.”
- “If only I could take those words back or *unsend* that e-mail, things would be much better.”

Some enterprising people develop ways to tap into our *if only* feelings to help us, and themselves. If you go to your computer and type in: www.ifonly.net, you will end up at a site that says, “Welcome to If Only ... ‘an oasis for the discerning traveller.’” Then there are pictures of hotels found to be worthy of inclusion in their portfolio of “some of the world’s finest and most exclusive hideaways” in places such as Mauritius, Maldives, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Dubai, among others.

Ah, yes, “*If only*...”

Sadly, some people live out their lives looking at the past, present and future through the *if only* window, and are never fulfilled, never enjoy the good things God gives them to enjoy.

The *if only window* is quite popular for many people when it comes to looking at their own spiritual life and their church. Some believe *if only* we could have what the early church had as we see here in the book of Acts, *if only* we had the apostles or other great leaders, *if only* we had the miracles, *if only* thousands were coming to Christ—well, at least hundreds, or scores—*then* our lives and churches would be so much better.

A key truth behind the events in the first part of Acts chapter 8 addresses the *if only* view and dispenses with it. This truth is that *God’s blessing depends on faithfulness, not circumstances.*

Yes, it is a truth which many Christians have heard repeatedly. Yet it is one which is not always *repeated* in practice. So, some Christians are living tied down by regrets of the past, disappointments with the present and pessimism toward the future *rather* than a sense of fulfilment from *being faithful* today.

We can break free from *if only* living as we come to terms with several key truths. The first is that success attracts problems.

Success Attracts Problems.

As we have seen, the first days of the church were a time of real success. The church rapidly grew from 120 to 3,000 to perhaps 10,000 and then, Luke tells us, multitudes were constantly being added (2:41, 4:4, 5:14, 6:1). The mega church is not a new thing. The first church in Jerusalem was a mega church.

Then there were the miracles, the bold preaching and ministry. There was God's direct discipline on Ananias and Sapphira and the effective solution to the inequitable distribution of food to needy widows.

And now we come to 8:1 where Luke writes, "on that day." *On that day*, in this time of great success and expansion, "a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem." "*Success attracts problems.*"

Note two kinds of problems here. First, the problem of outward opposition. At the time of Stephen's sham trial and cruel murder verse 1 says,

"And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."

This begins the second major division in Acts. Chapters 1-7 are about the beginning of the church. Chapters 8-12 deal with the church on the move in Judea and Samaria.

"Success attracts problems," including *outward opposition* from those who reject and hate God's light and truth. Jesus told His disciples that

"...the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed." (John 3:19-20)

Again He said,

"They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God." (John 16:2)

"Success attracts problems." This is an enduring principle. Our witness is to be active, filled with grace and light. Light which exposes both truth and falsehood. As we live successfully we too will experience *outward opposition* from time to time.

The second kind of problem we see in these verses is inward infiltration. Satan's forces attack with both *force* and *fraud*. Fraud or deceit can be just as deadly as force.

About 200 years ago on an average night you would find some men on a grassy knoll overlooking the North Atlantic, looking out at a ship's light. One man would pace back and forth, leading a horse with a lantern tied to its nodding chin. Soon the ship, taking a false reading from the lantern and being close to the coast, would run aground. Before long the wreck would be broken up by the strong surf and disappear. *But* not before the men on the knoll plundered what they could.

About 2,300 ships lie buried in this graveyard off Cape Hatteras from that period, most wrecked through this kind of treachery or deceit.

In verse 9 we meet a man named Simon, who used fraud. Simon was there practicing magic, astonishing the people. He claimed to be someone great. In fact, the designation “the great power of God” in verse 10, may have been a claim to be some kind of deity.

Philip came into this setting in Samaria and preached the gospel. Many believed and were baptized. Even Simon made a statement of faith and was baptized. Simon then stuck close to Philip to see the miracles. When Peter and John layed hands on the believers and they received the Holy Spirit, Simon's response revealed his motives and character: he wanted to buy this power so he could sell it. He wanted *his own franchise*.

Not everyone agrees on whether Simon truly believed. I have concluded he probably had the kind of belief many had when Jesus' ministered—they liked what they saw and heard, but did not fully embrace the truth, and were not truly changed by it.

Go to verse 20, Peter, who had arrived on the scene with John to check things out, said to Simon,

“May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.”

Drop down to verse 23,

“For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity.”

Simon was a fraud who infiltrated the church.

When we move forward to today, we may think, “Oh, *if only* God always worked as He did here making it easy for Peter to spot this falsehood.” God gives us wisdom and insight, but this clear revelation about Simon was given, I believe, because at this early stage of the church God wanted to clearly, dramatically draw the lines.

As well, if God always gave us clear revelations as He did in this case, then we would not be spurred on to study the Scriptures and ask God for, and then use His wisdom.

We have a superabundance of false teachers today. If you watch religious programs on TV you will see them. Some of the most successful and wealthy preach a gospel which Paul referred to as another gospel of a different kind, *i.e.*, not the real, true thing.

Let's move on to the second important truth here, that hard times can lead to fruitful ministry.

Hard Times Can Lead To Fruitful Ministry.

That may sound like a contradiction in terms. When we look at our own experience we may not always see this. As C.S. Lewis wrote, "Experience is the mother of illusion."

Yes, "Hard times *can* lead to fruitful ministry."

Let's set this scene in Samaria. The northern kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria in 722 B.C. The Assyrians took the brightest and best people out of the land. They left the rest, and then moved people in from other parts of their empire. As these people intermarried, the resulting group became known as the Samaritans. They developed their own religious practices and built their own temple. Most Jews despised the Samaritans and thought of them as *half breeds* and *dogs*.

When the church in Jerusalem was scattered by persecution, some of them moved north into Samaria. Philip, one of the seven chosen along with Stephen for leadership in chapter 6, led the way. He discovered that "hard times can lead to fruitful ministry." They can lead to opportunities to witness.

Philip had to leave Jerusalem, but he didn't disappear or blend into the woodwork. Let's pick it up at verse 4,

"Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them."

Philip simply changed locations for his ministry. New opportunities opened up. The people responded enthusiastically.

- Verse 6, the people were united in paying attention.
- Verse 7, they saw many delivered from demons and healed from diseases.
- Verse 8, "there was much rejoicing in that city." One writer refers to this as "*A Surprise in Samaria!*"

Our situation is much different, but the principle is true. When hard times come our way there will be opportunities to witness. Our response to tough times is a witness in itself. It may be a clear and good witness, or an cloudy and poor witness, but our response *is* a witness. Wherever we find ourselves, whatever our circumstances, there will be people who need to see and hear about Jesus.

Along with this, in hard times, there will be opportunities to display God's power. Look at Philip in verses 6-7,

"The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said

by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed.”

Philip, the apostles and a few others with them were given some very dramatic and, as Paul described them, *showy abilities* in the early days of the church. These were given to authenticate this new work of God, to authenticate the church.

God still performs miracles as He chooses. But by the time we get to the end of the book of Acts, we don't see the same kind of record that we see here in chapter 8. So, that brings us to a very practical question, “Does God still provide opportunities to display His power? And if so, does He do it through people like us?”

We can quickly and easily set aside the false teachers and preachers who focus on miracles and power. Even a superficial look tells us things don't line up with Scripture and that their focus is on building their own empires.

When it comes to ourselves, sometimes we may not consciously acknowledge God's power, or even take it into account. Doing this is not really much different than a woodpecker who one day was tapping on a tree when lightning struck it, causing the top part right above him to break off and fall to the ground. He quickly flew away and said, “I didn't know there was so much power in my beak!”

Then, at other times, we may limit the view of God's power through His people to the spectacular, the unexpected, the big results.

Remember Paul's example of being ready for all opportunities, as he described in the opening chapter of Romans,

“I am eager to preach the gospel ... I am not ashamed of the gospel,
for *it* is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...”
(15-16)

- It is *God's power* in the Gospel that saves people.
- It is *God's power* in you that encourages, lifts up, corrects, reconciles and restores others.
- It is *God's power*, and He wants to display it through you in all the places and seasons of your life.

There also are opportunities to see joyful results. Survey the results of Philip's ministry. Verse 8 says, “So there was much rejoicing in that city.” Now drop down to verse 12,

“But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike.”

Philip was willing to take the opportunities, to be faithful in difficult circumstances, to keep on ministering. Out of that God brought joy.

- Joy as people listened to the good news of Christ.
- Joy as people were delivered and healed.
- Joy as people believed and were saved.

The average experience in the first century, as in the twenty-first, was not this immediate or great in scope. But the immediacy or scope is not the point. That is all in God's hands. Our focus must be on *faithfulness*. As we are faithful, God will give us opportunities to see joyful results of His work.

I am certain that if we take a careful look at the past few days and weeks we can see evidences of joy that God has brought about through faithfulness—our own, and others.

God's blessing depends on faithfulness, not circumstances.

Faithful Ministry Is The Road To Progress.

The final truth to free us from the “*If Onlys*” is that faithful ministry is the road to progress. Here in this part of chapter 8 we see two aspects of progress. There is development of Christian life. First, let's look at the development of the new believers in Samaria.

“Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.” (14-17)

This delay of the Holy Spirit's indwelling has been discussed a great deal down through the centuries, with a variety of opinions on why and what it means.

Let's briefly note a few facts. First, Philip's preaching of the gospel was complete. It was not defective or in any way incomplete. He proclaimed the gospel, the good news of Christ (12).

The word for *belief* or *to believe* is a general term. As we look at the gospels, sometimes it refers to people truly believing to salvation. At other times not, but simply agreeing, at least for the moment. There is no reason to doubt the salvation of the people Luke mentions in verse 12.

Also, there is no New Testament pattern for a ceremony or experience to receive the Holy Spirit.

- In chapter 2 the Holy Spirit came to permanently indwell believers for the first time after they had been waiting as Christ told them to do.

- Here in chapter 8 it was through the Apostles laying hands on them (17).
- In chapter 9 where Luke records Paul's conversion, Ananias (obviously a different Ananias from chapter 5) talked with Paul, laid his hands on him and told him he was sent by God so that Paul would regain his sight and receive the Holy Spirit.
- In chapter 10 the Holy Spirit came dramatically to Cornelius and others when they believed while Peter *was still preaching. He hadn't even finished his sermon!*
- We know from Romans 8:9 that every believer has the Holy Spirit dwelling within.

The delay here may have been to affirm to the Jewish apostles Peter and John that these Samaritans were really saved by God's grace, just as they were.

In all of this don't overlook the main point. The gospel was preached, these people received Christ. They *began to move on and grow* in their new life. And this was the result of God's work through the *faithful ministry* of Philip and others.

Now let's move from the development of the new believers in Samaria to the development of Peter and John at this time. Go to verse 25,

“So, when they [Peter and John] had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.”

Peter and John took their responsibility of oversight seriously. They were willing to go to Samaria. You may recall that these were the same men who, when a Samaritan village did not receive Christ, asked Him, “Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (Luke 9:54).

They were *growing, developing* in both their understanding and in living out of Christ's truths. As a result, they had opportunities to witness to many others on their way back to Jerusalem.

Faithful ministry will lead us to grow and develop in our faith. Every believer needs to grow and develop. God does not save us and then immediately, or through some later experience, instantly transform us to finished products.

One writer tells about a group of tourists going through a picturesque village. One of them, in a rather patronizing manner, asked an old man sitting beside a fence, “Were any great men born in this village?” “No,” the man replied, “only babies.”

To progress in spiritual maturity you must take the path of faithful ministry.

Faithful service also leads to progress in being able to detect counterfeits, to spot falsehood and deceivers. We see this in Peter detecting the real nature of Simon. We see Simon's real nature in 18-19,

“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.’

The next verses show Peter’s insight from God,

“But Peter said to him, ‘May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! ‘You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.’”
(20-21)

It is interesting that when Peter told him to repent and pray, Simon did not do that, but asked Peter to pray for him. He was still focused on power in people. His only concern was for the bad consequences which, he hoped, Peter could prevent from happening.

This was clear and concise. God gave Peter the insight to see what was going on in Simon’s mind and heart. God gave insight to Peter as he was *faithful* to go from Jerusalem to check out what was happening in Samaria, and then to affirm that yes, this was God’s work. Peter was growing in wisdom and discernment, in sensitivity to God.

The principle remains true for us. God promises us wisdom ... we are to ask *in faith*, believing he will give it to us. God does not pour his wisdom into passive people. He generously gives it to us as we are faithfully walking and asking, serving and trusting Him. And part of that wisdom is the ability to discern what is true and that which is not.

Conclusion.

God’s blessing depends on faithfulness, not circumstances.

To avoid the “*If Onlys*” and their debilitating impact, we need to remember and stretch ourselves to live by this reality. If we fail to do this, we may have sincere, deep desires, but they will be no more effective than wishing on a star, or making a wish and throwing a few coins into a wishing well.

One of the greatest “If Only” regrets for believers is “If only I had *been faithful*.” That is a regret that none of us need to have.

As you spend time with God now,

- Thank Him that His blessing on your life and work for Him does not depend on your circumstances, on what you are or are not, what you have or don’t have, but on your *faithfulness*.
- Then talk with God about your current state of faithfulness with Him.
- Determine to live faithfully for Jesus in every area and moment of your life.

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