

Leaving the comfort zone

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[0:00] So have your Bibles open at Acts 8 please. Now if you think back to chapter 1 of Acts, you'll remember that Jesus said these words that I put up on the screen there.

! Jesus had told the apostles to go out of Jerusalem, but in fact they don't seem to have been in any hurry to leave.

All the action we've had so far all happened on the Temple Mount or its immediate environs. And in a sense that's understandable.

That was the place where they thought God was most at home, and it's where the Jewish religion was focused. In fact, in spite of the opposition that they were facing, in a sense Jerusalem was their comfort zone.

This is where they expected to be when they were dealing with issues of Yahweh, of the Lord. They expected to be in Jerusalem. And they're not keen to leave it.

[1:22] The Jews, at least in Jerusalem, had some knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures and some understanding of the Holy Spirit from the prophets. Sooner they went out of Jerusalem and Judea, it's going to be very different.

And this move outward to Samaria, it isn't... The problem is not really one of geography. It's not very far. Only a few miles.

And the Pax Romana would keep the roads safe, so you could travel about without expecting to be set on by brigands or anything. So it wasn't a great distance they had to go, but culturally speaking, there was a great gulf they had to cross.

There was enmity and suspicion between Jews and Samaritans, and that had dated back centuries. Well, in fact, at least 450 years, when Nehemiah had come to Jerusalem to rebuild the city wall.

And if you're familiar with the story, the Samaritans, those sort of half-breed Jews who had been left in the land, had, during the exile, had tried to stop him rebuilding the wall.

[2:39] And the Samaritans had opposed Nehemiah. And, in fact, the Samaritans had practiced a sort of debased form of the Jewish religion. You may remember the conversation that Jesus had with a Samaritan woman in John 4, 20-25, where the woman asked Jesus the following question.

She said, Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem. And Jesus declared, Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.

You Samaritans worship what you do not know. We worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming, and has now come, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.

For they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and truth. The woman said, I know that Messiah, called Christ, is coming.

When he comes, he will explain everything to us. And then Jesus declared, I who speak to you am he. So Jesus had gone to the Samaritans, but basically there was still a great gulf, a great cultural gulf, between the apostles and the church in Jerusalem, and the Samaritans.

[4:19] And Nehemiah, if you remember, had actually excluded the Samaritans from the temple, and the community of God. And for these early Jewish Christians, coming from an Orthodox Jewish background, it would be very hard to swallow the idea that God wanted them to go to the Samaritans.

And anyway, would the Samaritans want to hear about a Jewish Messiah? They believed that you didn't worship God in Jerusalem, you worshipped him on a Samaritan mountain.

That, of course, in a sense, going right back to the split of the kingdom that we've read about in 1 Kings. And in fact, wouldn't to go to the Samaritans, wouldn't that just be rubbing in their second class status, religiously speaking?

And yet, Jesus had said, be my witnesses in Jerusalem, yes, but in Judea and Samaria, but even if these Christian preachers could get their head around their need to go, there's going to be tremendous cultural problems.

The lack of a Jewish religious background on the Samaritans' part would mean that the scripture-based speeches, presentations that Peter had given and Stephen had given, very dependent on expounding the Old Testament, were not going to be effective, probably not even in Samaria, and certainly when they went out into the Gentile world.

[5:58] And these weren't just theoretical issues either. Luke presents to us here the case of Simon. There were endless possibilities for misunderstanding and confusion.

You notice he was described as the divine great power, the great power of God. There was a great confusion as we'll look at in a bit more detail later, between the religion and the faith of Yahweh, of the Lord, and can only describe as magic, sorcery.

And anyway, the Jews could have argued, well look, there are still plenty of Jews unconverted.

Let's focus on the Jews for the moment. And somebody else can worry about the Samaritans later.

We know that Jesus has told us to go there, but surely we can put that off for a bit yet. But the Spirit has other ideas.

The Spirit says, no, it's time to go. So something was needed to kick them into action and move them out. And that something turned out to be persecution. And there's this sort of dramatic irony that Luke shows us, of course, that was orchestrated largely by Saul.

[7:14] Paul, in verse 3, that was the very Saul who, of course, after his conversion was going to be the Paul who would go to the Gentiles. But Saul was breathing out threats against the believers.

And they were just too public. So although the apostles managed to stay behind in Jerusalem, as it tells us, it's the disciples who are scattered.

And they're going to take the gospel out. into these messy, religiously mixed regions of Samaria and Galilee. But that's not to say there aren't going to be problems.

There are. Stephen's condemnation of the Jewish abuse of the covenant and the law of Moses had started the persecution.

Stephen had been the first victim of it. And his fellow deacon, Philip, is going to be the one who would spearhead this new gospel push. It's clear, I think, from the context immediately after the story of Stephen, and also from 8, chapter 1, and 8, verse 1, and 8, verse 14, which says the apostles were still in Jerusalem.

[8:29] So the Philip here is clearly Philip the deacon, the one who's mentioned in the list after Stephen, not the apostle Philip. There is an apostle Philip, of course, that we were reading about this morning, but it's generally agreed that this must mean Philip the deacon, because the apostles were still based in Jerusalem.

And so Philip is fleeing the Jerusalem persecution, and he lands up in a Samaritan city. We're not actually told what city it is, but one of the cities of the Samaritans, a place where Orthodox Jews really would not want to go.

By going there, they were polluting themselves. But it's the only place they could flee to, where the power of the Jewish elders and rulers would not be able to get at them.

And so Philip is going to speak the gospel to the Samaritans there. And what would his message be? Would it be some accommodation to some Samaritan sensibilities?

Say, well, of course, yeah, I mean, you could worship God on this mountain. But no, he doesn't say that. What he proclaims is the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed king in the line of David.

[9:54] It's clear from those comments of the Samaritan woman that they did have some idea that a king and Messiah was to come. But Philip says, yes, to you. I'm bringing the message of that king in the line of David, the anointed king, the Messiah, the Christ.

And what do we find? We find that these people are prepared to listen even when the Jews weren't. And in the absence of the apostles, the spirit performs signs of the kingdom through Philip. In verse seven, we're told that. But unfortunately, even these would lead to be a source of misunderstanding. Sorry, my slide number's wrong here, I think, but never mind. These would be a source of misunderstanding. Simon, we're told, was a megadynamic sorcerer. That's what the Greek phrase is. It's megadynamis, the great power. So, some mega character. But Philip's signs seemed to trump Simon, and the people followed him instead, and were baptized in the name of Jesus.

[11:16] But these people, and certainly Simon, were not Orthodox Jews, and there was some confusion in their mind between magic and religion. It seems that Simon himself followed Philip, but apparently for the wrong reasons, in verse 13.

This needed to be sorted out. But that wasn't even the worst problem. There was something very wrong here. These people had been baptized in the name of Jesus, and Peter had said, the promise is to you and everyone who the Lord will call, the promise of the Holy Spirit to those who repent and are baptized in the name of Jesus.

Where was he? we're told that the Spirit had not come. So let's look now at the rest of this passage. I'd like to look at it in three sections.

First of all, what I've called the anomaly. That's a long word, but it means something that doesn't fit the rules, something where the laws seem to break down.

And this was an anomaly. Where was the Holy Spirit? it. And then we'll look at the misunderstanding of Simon. It's worth looking at in detail, I think.

[12:35] And then we'll look at the finale, what the result of this was, but we'll also, in terms of that, think of the application to ourselves today. So let's look at this anomaly, as I've called it, this thing that didn't seem to be right, that didn't seem to fit the rules.

Samaritans had believed and baptized, but apparently they had not received the Holy Spirit. This was something that Luke points out was worrying, was wrong.

There was something not right here. What are we to make of this? Perhaps the Spirit didn't endorse this move into Samaritan territory. But I think that's not the case.

In fact, perhaps it's a reenactment of Acts 1, where the believers had to wait for the Spirit to come. Until, and well, why was this?

Perhaps because this was such a radical step. It was bringing a whole new class of people into the covenant community. And it needed a proper start, as it were.

[13:47] Because Nehemiah and Ezra, hadn't they, specifically excluded the Samaritans from the covenant people? How are they to be included in the new covenant? And perhaps the apostles themselves needed to be convinced that this was the right step, that the promise really was for not just the Jews, but for the Samaritans and then to the ends of the earth.

And after all, it was the church with the apostolic authority who had been given the keys to the kingdom, as it says in Matthew 16, 19, were they right to unlock the gate, as it were, and let the Samaritans in?

So in fact, two things were needed here. First of all, the apostolic approval to say, yes, the church now includes you Samaritans.

You are now part of the covenant community of God. God, but even more important than the approval of the apostles, was the approval of the spirit himself.

And we find both these things are provided in verse 17. We're not told here exactly what form it took. We don't read about the sound of a wind and flame as we did in Acts 1, but it's clear there's some definite and visible sign of the spirit coming, so there would be no doubt.

[15:15] But we're not told exactly what that was, but it was clear that the spirit now had come upon these Samaritan believers. The new covenant community, the church, had expanded to now allow in these Samaritans.

There could be no doubt the spirit himself had put his stamp of approval on this step out into the Samaritan community, outside the bounds of the traditional people of God.

But there was misunderstanding. I'm sorry, that was slide four, I thought I got my numbers not quite right. But that was the slide says the Samaritans had indeed been baptised now in the Holy Spirit. So let's look now at Simon's misunderstanding. I think there's probably a reason why Luke describes it in some detail here.

Sometimes, as here, when the gospel is first preached in entirely new areas, it is accompanied by miraculous signs. But in fact, there is a certain danger in such things.

[16:32] Simon and his Samaritan followers were into power of a sort, but the power they were into was a power of magic.

And as I say, there was clearly, Simon was described as the divine great power, the great power of God. There was confusion in their minds between magic and the power of the Holy Spirit.

And the temptation, therefore, was to think of the work of the Holy Spirit as just a superior form of magic. And this seems to be what happened here.

Simon exemplifies much wrong-headed thinking about the Holy Spirit, and I think it's worth looking at his confusion in detail. So let's look at four things about Simon's misunderstanding.

First of all, Simon thought that the Holy Spirit came from the apostles. Verse 16, he had seen the laying on of hands part, but he seems to have missed the praying of verse 15 that went before it.

[17:44] Simon had a reputation as a sorcerer, but perhaps he was conscious of the fact that most of his sorcery was just fakery and tricks. But this looked like the real thing.

Philip and these apostles, it seems really were healing people. But still he misunderstood. He thought the power rested in themselves, just as he claimed power of his own as a sorcerer. He thought the power rested in themselves, not in their God. So that was his first misunderstanding. And his second misunderstanding was to think that this was really the business that the Holy Spirit was about, to perform signs and miracles.

And he presumably got this idea from following Philip around. And presumably, or perhaps Simon himself had participated in an external sign of the Spirit coming on the Samaritan believers.

We're not told that he didn't. And yet we find that the work of the Spirit had not penetrated into his heart. In verse 23, he thought the Spirit was about doing miracles and signs.

[19:05] He didn't understand that the true work of the Spirit is to point us to the Lord Jesus. His role is that, to point us to Jesus and to convict the world of sin and righteousness of judgment.

And the third part of his misunderstanding, which really proceeded from the first two, was that he thought the Spirit was a resource to be exploited or a commodity that could be traded.

And doubtless in the past, he traded spells and charms himself. But the Spirit is not a product that Peter was offering for sale.

He's a gift, Peter says, from God. Verse 20. Now, we may not be offering money for the Spirit, but I think even so, we can sometimes fall into the same trap.

We can fall into the trap of treating the Holy Spirit as a resource for our own purposes. And if we haven't got enough of a resource, what do we do?

[20:15] We look up on the internet and find someone who seems to have that resource available. We find someone who does have that resource and we go and try and get it from them or buy it from them.

And we conform into that trap with the Holy Spirit, I think. We can land up idolising leaders, as Simon seems to have idolised Philip.

Particularly those leaders who seem to have special gifts. But this is a fundamental mistake. It's to turn the truth on its head. It's not that the Spirit is a resource for us to use.

In fact, exactly the opposite is the truth, isn't it? We are a resource for the Spirit to use. And the Spirit will do as he thinks fit. sometimes he makes use of talents that people already have, but not always.

But in all cases he will remodel us, just as he had remodeled Stephen and Philip by his Holy Spirit. But we're remodeled to suit his purposes, not ours.

[21:28] And perhaps I'll label this number four, but really it's just going from the root of this misunderstanding. Simon's problem basically was one of perception.

He thought of the Spirit as it, rather than he, didn't he? He thought of the Spirit as a divine power, rather than as a divine presence.

Certainly Jesus has said, when the Spirit comes you will receive power, but that's not quite the same thing as saying that the Spirit and the power are the same thing.

When the Spirit comes and his presence is there, then he will bring the power that they need to cross the cultural boundaries, to proclaim the word of God.

Sorry, I think you've got your voice on there. Simon's problem was one of perception.

[22:38] We can easily do that. We can easily think of the Spirit as being an it, something that we can tap into, as we might plug into the electricity supply.

But that's not the case. The Spirit is the Spirit of God, of the Lord himself, and he is the sovereign one. And when he comes, yes, we will have power, as he's promised.

But it's the power that he provides. The Spirit is sovereign. And indeed, presumably the apostles had laid their hands on Simon.

But for Simon, at least, it seems to have been ineffective, as Peter is horrified to discover, isn't he? Peter is obviously shocked that such a misunderstanding could arise.

Simon needs to repent. And Peter is very clear about that in verse 22 and verse 23. Ben reminded me this morning, there are all sorts of legends about Simon the sorcerer, but we don't really have any more information about him than this.

[23:52] does he repent? There's a hint that perhaps he does. At least he prays to Peter, asks Peter to pray for him that these things will not come upon him, but we don't really know.

But perhaps Simon had finally got the message. So what is the result of this?

Well, actually the apostles themselves go back to Jerusalem, verse 25, but the boundary has been crossed. The cultural barrier, the dividing wall, if you like, of the partition has been crossed.

Because on the way home, the apostles also start to preach the gospel to the Samaritans. realize that this gospel is good news for the Samaritans also.

So what can we conclude from this? When we're preaching into a hostile culture, we need to be careful to avoid misunderstanding, but at the same time, we need to be confident that the Holy Spirit can cross these boundaries.

[25:12] boundaries. You get these buzzwords like contextualization, it's a good word, that, which means putting your message in the context of the people you're speaking to, and this is a good idea to avoid misunderstanding is certainly a good thing, yes.

But that's not a substitute for spiritual power, it is really the Holy Spirit who crosses these boundaries. And secondly, the Spirit may choose sometimes to perform miraculous signs, people argue about this, don't they?

I'm not myself, a total cessationist, but people have different views, but I do think that these signs are often open to misinterpretation, and the Samaritans represented by Simon really seem to have signed up for the healings, don't they?

If you read 7 and 8, verses 7 and 8, the other Samaritans perhaps hadn't had a genuine change of heart, but at the time, Simon certainly hadn't, he had just signed up for the miracles.

And indeed, you can achieve the same thing in other ways if you take medical help or what people used to talk about, rice Christians at one time, didn't they? Give out free food as long as you become a Christian.

[26:40] We shouldn't do that, of course. What the gospel is about, it's not about miraculous signs really, but it's not about anything else either.

It's not about giving free gifts to people of any sort. It's about a change in people's hearts. We need the spirit to do that.

Indeed, Jesus says only the spirit can do that. And we need to keep on our mind that the primary role of the spirit remains to convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment.

That's what Jesus said he would come to do, and that's what he's there for. If there are signs of or visible manifestations of the spirit, as there are sometimes, and certainly there seem to have been in this Samaritan city, they're meant to show that God is indeed at work.

And sometimes that's good, but they're not the essential feature. The essential feature, the thing that really matters, is the change of heart, the change that people seek the Lord in their hearts. [27:56] And thirdly, the church takes the spirit to the world, but not as a commodity to be sold or as even as a virus to be caught, perhaps, as Richard Dawkins described religion sometimes, as a virus.

Well, there's some truth in it, in a sense you do catch it, and it does take over your mind, but that's not really the way the scripture describes the work of the Holy Spirit.

The spirit is sovereign. It's rather that the spirit brings the church and its message to the world. The church, and it's not really the other way around. The spirit goes first and brings the message of the church, although of course the church is the vehicle of that message.

And particularly, of course, we need to remind ourselves that now there are no watertight cultural and religious barriers. believers. The gospel is offered to all men everywhere.

Wherever there are men and women, whenever there is Homo sapiens, whenever there are children of Adam, then the gospel is for them.

[29:17] And John tells us that in Revelation. He spells it out in great detail. Revelation 22, verse 17 says, the spirit and the bride say come, and let him who hears say come.

Whoever is thirsty, let him come, and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life. And perhaps John is talking about the Holy Spirit there when he says the water of life, but it is the spirit, at least anyway, who first says come.

The bride echoes that, the church echoes that call, come. And then let him who hears say come. I'm not quite sure how that works, but I suppose it's saying that second and third generation Christians, once they've heard the gospel and responded to it, they can also issue that invitation. Say come. But it's the spirit who issues the invitation first. and it is the spirit that points to Jesus Christ. But still, that's all very well, and we saw how the gospel went out to the Samaritans.

[30:33] That doesn't solve our immediate problem, though, does it? How will the spirit open the hearts and minds of those in Brighton?

Philip's signs may have caused misunderstanding, but they did work in finding an opening for the gospel. We don't know how the spirit is going to do this, in a sense, but what we do know is the spirit had gone in advance, in one sense.

The people there were prepared to listen, and what we find now is that the people in Brighton are not prepared to listen. person. So how in the 21st century do we connect with those?

How do we find those whose heart the spirit is opening? Not perhaps where we expect, as the early Christians did.

They expected to get the best response in Jerusalem, but instead they ended up being chased out of the city. But there are those whom the spirit is calling.

[31:44] How do we find them? And on the other hand, if we feel that, yes, the people of Brighton do need this gospel, how are we going to get them to listen?

And of course, we need some creative thinking, and we need some boldness, and we need contextualisation, we need to present the good news in a way that's relevant to people today. But none of those things on their own are going to do the business. And often, in fact, the spirit doesn't work in the way we expect at all.

And he opens doors in an entirely different way. Heard people from time to time say, you know, once we've started doing evangelism, whether it's for door-to-door or book table or something, then, well actually, the spirit didn't actually use those things, but the fact that we were there going out meant that he did open other doors.

And we need to be praying for the spirit to open doors. We could go around and knock on doors, but we can't knock on the doors of people's hearts.

[33:05] Only the Holy Spirit can do that. So we're here in Viaduct Road, aren't we? As a church, we're confident, I think, that the spirit told us to stay in Viaduct Road.

We did, ten years or so ago, think, should we be somewhere else? Are you moving us on? But, no, we've some scripture and our prayer and our study, it seemed that the spirit was saying, no, you're here.

This is where I put you and this is where I want you to be. But still, we're, well, and we're able to buy the building and we've got involved in the community in various ways.

And our numbers are growing, but still, we're not seeing the crowds in London Road or Viaduct Road converted, are we? So, I think, if we're here, we need to be praying that the spirit will open doors into the community around us.

And that might well lead us out of the comfort zone. And we're not happy with that by definition, are we? It might be a challenge, it might be difficult, it might be uncomfortable.

[34:22] But we do need to seek the mind of the spirit and to take this gospel out into the world. But still, we don't do that, oh dear, sorry, typo there.

We don't do that with a spirit of discouragement, however. We do it with the spirit, well, in our spirit echoing the fact that the spirit spirit is indeed taking the message everywhere.

Thank you.