

Simon the sorcerer

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[0:00] Father God, what we have sung, we turn into a prayer. Lord, speak to us this morning. Speak, O Lord, through your word, plant your word down deep within us and shape and fashion us in your likeness.

That the light of Christ might be seen today in our acts of love and our deeds of faith. Lord, speak, we pray, through the power of your word. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Jew and Samaritan don't go well together. If you're a Jewish person, you don't get involved with the Samaritans. Some may even view the Samaritan as sort of half-breeds, sort of half-Jewish, but half not.

They got involved with the Assyrians. They worship God in wrong and foolish ways. Don't have anything to do with people from Samaria.

And if you were to go into Samaria in the time of Acts 8, you would even hear people talking of Simon, a sorcerer.

[1:25] A man using evil powers to amaze the city in Samaria. He would have been healing people, blessing people, cursing the bad.

And some may have even said he predicted the future. And they hailed him as the great power of God. But the people of Samaria seemed very far away, spiritually speaking.

Far away from Jesus, who really is the power of God, the Son of God. They were far away from bowing the knee to King Jesus and worshipping him alone.

Meanwhile, the church in Jerusalem, which had just grown and grown and grown, and experienced great blessings in thousands of people repenting of their sin, baptized, had the Holy Spirit working through them.

They were so blessed. But the church in Jerusalem had just been shaken. The first Christian martyr, Stephen.

[2:47] He'd been stoned to death. He was speaking so boldly, and now he's dead. And not only did Stephen die, but Saul was actively persecuting God's people.

Saul was there when Stephen was stoned to death, and he approved of his killing. And in verse 3 of chapter 8, it tells us that Saul began to destroy the church.

Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. And so the church in Jerusalem was finding itself in hard and rocky times.

Twice in the first few verses, we read of this church that was so strong and vibrant, now sort of blown like a dandelion, scattered. See that verse 1?

On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. And then in verse 4, those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

[4:10] It's people were being scattered all over the place. The church in Jerusalem, which once stood strong, now broken up. But if we've been reading the book of Acts carefully, actually we might be encouraged by these verses.

A key verse in the book of Acts that we need to keep coming back to. Acts 1, verse 8. The Lord Jesus said this, But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

And then Acts chapter 8, verse 1 says, that they were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. This may seem like hard circumstances, but this is part of the plan.

Part of the plan of the Lord Jesus Christ. There would be witnesses in Jerusalem, and then Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth.

It's going according to plan. And the scattering is actually producing fruit. It's producing great things, because look at what verse 4 says.

[5:45] Look at what they have the opportunity to do. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. These aren't the apostles.

These are normal Christians. They've been scattered. They've been persecuted. But they're still preaching the word. They're still telling people of the Lord Jesus. Telling people we've been witnesses of him and his power at work in us.

We know the blessing of salvation. We know his spirit living inside us. You can come and find life in him today. And that's sort of what normal Christianity looks like, even today.

We gather here together, and then we scatter throughout the city to our homes, to our neighbors, to our workplaces, to our families.

The church gathers, and then it scatters, and that's what's happening here. But, it was going to Samaria, and Jew and Samaritan do not get on.

[7:04] And yet, when Jesus walked this earth, he went to Samaria. Do you remember that conversation he had at the well with that woman from Samaria?

And not just any woman, but one who had five husbands and was living with a man who wasn't her husband. And he had compassion on her.

He also told the parable of the good Samaritan, and yet, people may have thought, there can't be a good Samaritan. But Jesus went there.

Jesus came amongst his own people. Jesus was that promised descendant of Abraham, and the king in the line of Israel's great king, David.

He's come amongst his own people. He's come to save people of his own people. But he's come to seek and save the lost amongst the whole world.

[8:15] Even Samaria. His mission was simply beginning in Jerusalem, but expanding to Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the world.

But how? How in Samaria? It's such a lost city. Look at what they're gripped by. Verse 9. Now for some time, a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria.

He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, this man is rightly called the great power of God.

And so they followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery. This is a lost city gripped by the evil power of sorcery.

They are not part of God's kingdom of light. It's good to stop for a moment and recognize that there are evil powers of darkness in our world.

[9:33] Good to remember that Satan is real and evil is real. And then there is even evil work in our own city.

A few months ago, I read of a Brighton resident called Eva Petulengo, who was a famous clairvoyant. She predicted the future.

She even worked with the rich and famous. She was flown to Hollywood to work among the stars. She was using evil powers. And so even in our own city, there is evil at work, dark arts going on.

Evil is real. But here in Samaria, even as they are gripped by the power of evil, we find that another power comes.

The great power of God. We see in verse 5 that Philip came to Samaria. Philip, we heard him mentioned back in chapter 6.

[10:44] He was a deacon alongside the recently martyred Stephen. And he finds himself here in Samaria. And we read this of what he was up to. Verse 6.

When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. But with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed.

And so there was great joy in that city. And so in this city, it's like we have two rivals at work. Simon the sorcerer, who's also known as the great power of God, and Jesus the Messiah, also known as the great son of God.

And it's really a battle of evil versus goods. And the miracles that were happening from God through Philip, though greatly powerful, probably didn't look an awful lot different from what Simon was up to.

But the real difference between these two men comes in the message that they were proclaiming. Simon's message was this.

[12:05] Look at what he says of himself. Halfway through verse 9. He boasted that he was someone great. Simon's message really is this.

Look at me. Look how great I am. Look at all I have done. Now, let's listen to what Philip's message is.

Verse 5. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. And verse 12. When they believed Philip as he proclaimed the goodness of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized both men and women.

Philip's message is, look at Jesus. Look at all that he has done. Simon has power for sure, but look at Jesus.

[13:15] A few weeks ago, we were staying up in the Lake District town of Keswick. It's a beautiful area, as the name suggests, full of lakes and hills and mountains.

And on the Monday, we took a walk up this hill called La Trigue. Here's what you get to see when you get to the top. It's stunning.

But as you walk up there, and as you get to the top, if you just turn around, you see something even greater than La Trigue. You see Mount Skiddle, the highest mountain in that area, the second tallest mountain in the Lake District.

We thought we'd done well there, but look at that. That's greater. And in Samaria, they have seen that Simon's great, but they're seeing that Jesus is greater.

Simon and all his evil power cannot match up with the power of God and his word going forth.

[14:26] Because look at what the word does. Verse 5 again, Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there.

Oh, he performed miraculous signs, but verse 6 says they all paid close attention to what he said. And then in verse 12, when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

They didn't come to believe in Philip because of all the miracles, although that would have sort of confirmed that God was working here.

Rather, what they came to believe in and pay close attention to was his message, was the word that was going out. The word was drawing people in.

And so we're seeing in this city, as Simon, the great power of God is at work, as he's known, we're seeing actually the greatest power is in the word of God being proclaimed.

[15:43] The word of God is what's drawing people. Today, we are here in the 21st century. We're in 21st century Brighton.

We're in a city that celebrates love and freedom. We're in a culture that enjoys many exciting things, particularly exciting technology.

And we see in our culture the power of the phone, the power of scrolling through social media. You ever sit there and think, I've been doing this for hours.

It has power. People have all sorts of things that they can follow, that they can love. So easy to follow the latest trends on social media.

I was in Primark yesterday, trying on some clothes, and as I was doing that, I heard someone say, look, I found the jumper that's been viral. 17-pound jumper.

[16:47] It has power. And maybe, in this world, full of many, many exciting things, many powerful messages going out, maybe we look at what we do as a church, and we think we need to change something to make it look more exciting.

But what has the power to transform lives? It's the word of God proclaimed.

It's preaching from this book, the Bible. It's reading it out. That's what's going to transform lives. It's the powerful gospel message that the Son of God, in all his great power and majesty, has stepped down from heaven to come and live amongst us on this earth.

It's proclaiming the one who has shown the greatest act of costly love by laying down his life for us on the cross. And so to a city that celebrates love and freedom, we have the greatest message of love to share that can set us free from our captivity to sin.

That's the seed that we have to scatter. And that's life transforming. That's what our city needs to hear. That's what this city in Samaria needed to hear.

[18:26] This city, gripped by the power of the sorcerer, is now being gripped by the power of the gospel.

They're standing amazed of Jesus. And look at what people are doing. Look at how they're responding in verse 12. They were baptized, both men and women.

They came to believe. They repented of their sin. They were baptized. They were transformed.

They were saying, I'm gonna be obedient to Jesus.

I'm following him. And so we need to trust in the power of God and this life transforming message revealed to us in this word.

Earlier this week, there was a blue super moon. It wasn't blue. It was more yellow, red.

[19:31] And it was shining bright. And there were so many photos online of people who wanted to go out and get a look, get a picture of this stunning view.

So what happens when something extraordinary happens? We want to go and have a look. I remember a year ago when this fire happened at the Royal Albion Hotel.

I remember going down and having a look a few days later, still smelling the burning smell.

Something extraordinary happened. I was there looking at it and our people were. They were amazed by it.

And here in Samaria, of all places, they have been transformed by the gospel and so people come and have a look.

And most significantly, the apostles come. Verse 14. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria.

[20:30] These apostles, these people in Jerusalem, they heard Samaria had accepted the word of God and so they thought they must go and check this out.

Really, Samaria? But what happens as they go and have a look may strike us as a bit odd.

Look at verse 15. When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers that they might receive the Holy Spirit. They prayed that they might receive the Holy Spirit, but how come the Spirit's not there yet?

In Acts chapter 2, verse 38, Peter, in his great sermon, preached, repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

receiving the Spirit isn't something we need to wait for. It's not something extra that comes later.

[21:41] what's going on? What's going on here? Why is he not there until the apostles come?

There's no indication in scriptures that we need to wait. But this is a significant moment. Something historical is going on in God's salvation history.

Let me read verse 16 and 17 and then I'll say a bit more. Because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them, they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Then Peter and John placed their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. It raises questions for us. Does this mean that we should expect Christians to wait before they receive the Spirit?

Do we have to be baptized before the Spirit comes? Is the Spirit an added extra for some Christians and not for others? Well, the answers to those questions are no.

[22:49] Rather, what is happening here is that this is a historic day in God's salvation history. The gospel is going out of Jerusalem and to Judea and Samaria, even to dark Samaria, even to a city which was gripped by the power of the sorcerer.

And so to show that these believers who had heard Philip preach the gospel, who had been baptized, to show they really had been transformed by the gospel, to show that God was really expanding his work beyond Jerusalem.

The apostles come and they confirm they really have accepted the word of God. This is really genuine. The gospel is really spreading. And so on this significant day in this unlikely town, the Spirit now comes through the apostles.

It was a significant historical day as God's work was going forth from Jerusalem, showing that the Spirit can break down barriers between Jewish and Samaritan people, making one new people in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the great power of God at work, far greater than sorcery. And we'll see that similar things happen in chapters 10 and 11 as the gospel goes to Gentiles.

[24:26] Similar things happen with the Spirit coming in a special way. We do not live in such historical moments, but we do not need to doubt that the Spirit is in us if we're believers in the Lord Jesus.

1 Corinthians 12 verse 3 says, Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says Jesus be cursed, and no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. If you're a Christian today, if you can say Jesus is Lord, the Spirit is in you. The Spirit has been working in you to bring you to faith in Christ, and He helps us to say Jesus is Lord.

And He continues to work in us to reveal more of the Lord Jesus to us, to grow us more into the likeness of the Lord Jesus.

God works in us by His great power, by the great power of the Holy Spirit. Now in this wonderful historical moment in Samaria, as the gospel comes, as the word of God is preached, we see, finally, that it matters how we respond to the gospel.

[25:56] It really matters how we respond to the gospel. Many were baptized, many repented of their sins. But what happened to Simon, the sorcerer?

Have a look down in verse 13. Simon himself believed and was baptized, and he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

We can read that verse and we can think, wow, great, Simon's been transformed. Simon's become a believer in Christ. But reading this verse carefully and the verses following, actually we see this is not the case.

Actually, we see it really matters how we respond to the gospel. We see that after he was baptized, he followed Philip everywhere.

It's good to have Christian role models, Christian, we can follow, we can look up to. But really, we're following Christ first.

[27:11] And Simon actually seems far more interested in following Philip because of the great signs and miracles that he saw. Remember who Simon is.

He's a sorcerer. He does all sorts of wonderful signs. and he is realizing that there's something even more powerful at work here.

God is far more powerful than he is. But have a look how he responds further in verse 18. When Simon saw that the spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.

He is following for all the wrong reasons. He wants to pay money for the power. He wants to look impressive.

He is right that God is powerful, that God is impressive, that God does do marvelous things. But he wants to use this power for his own gain so that he can look even more powerful than he already is.

[28:32] And he thinks he can buy that with money. But Peter says very firmly that is not the right response. Verse 20, may your money perish with you because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money.

You cannot buy the gift of God with money. Money can buy you all sorts of things in life. It can get you really far. It can buy you power and position.

It could even buy you followers on social media. But money cannot buy you salvation. Money cannot give you the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The invitation of God to his people is this. Come all you who are thirsty and you who have no money come buy and eat.

Come buy wine and milk without money and without cost. the blessing of salvation from God is a free gift freely available to all, to all Jew, Samaritan and Gentile.

[29:51] You cannot buy it. Nothing you can do can earn it. Sure, it's costly.

it cost Jesus his life. And it means for us that we've got to say no to sin and what we want and yes to following Jesus.

We've got to repent. We've got to turn around. But the gospel is powerful. It's life transforming. It brings life to the dead.

It forgives sinners their sin. It frees them from hell. how you respond to the gospel matters.

If you hear it and believe that you must pay for it in some way, then you've got it wrong.

[30:55] If you hear it and think, well, I must go to church. I must take communion. I must give 10% of my money.

If you do those things thinking you're sort of buying your way to salvation from God, buying blessing from God, then you've got it wrong, just like Simon's got it wrong here.

Maybe even you've been baptized because you think that's the right thing. that's what God wants to see you do and yet you haven't known new life from him.

Well, what does Peter continue to say to Simon? Verse 21 to 23. Simon's got it wrong.

He's misunderstood. Simon, it's not about you and your greatness. It's not about your name being lifted high.

[32:34] It is about seeing God's greatness and our weakness. It's about seeing our perfect saviour die in our place because we are imperfect, sinful people.

we are sinful, rebellious creatures but Jesus has died for us so we can be forgiven. Simon, it's not about your name being lifted high.

It's about Jesus, the name above all names being lifted high. So humble yourself before him. Find the saviour who can set you free.

Repent of your sin. How does Simon respond? Verse 24, then Simon answered, pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me.

He wants prayer for protection but he doesn't admit his sin. He doesn't fall on his knees before God in repentance. See, it really matters how we respond to the gospel.

[33:46] And so this morning how have you responded to the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ? How have you responded? Have you humbly bowed the knee to Jesus, the King?

Have you said sorry for the sins that you have committed against him? are you willing to say it's not about me but it's about Jesus my saviour, it's about your name being lifted high.

How you respond to this really matters. Now we don't know if Simon ever truly repented of his sin. The story finishes there.

But the story doesn't have to finish there for you. you. And even today you can call upon the name of Jesus to forgive you of your sin.

And for those of us who have done that, for those of us who have seen the great power of God at work, this is a lesson that not everybody's going to get it.

[35:02] But still we keep proclaiming Jesus. Look at what the apostles do in verse 25. After they had further proclaimed the word of the Lord and testified about Jesus, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem preaching the gospel in many Samaritan cities.

They keep proclaiming, they keep scattering the seeds. they keep proclaiming Jesus, the great son of God who has come to service by giving his life up for us.

And that's what we, the church gathered today, can go and do. Scatter that seed. Scatter seeds of the gospel and trusting that his words, his son, the Lord Jesus Christ is far more powerful than the powers of darkness and of evil.

Let's pray. Father God, thank you that you are the all-powerful one.

Thank you that your gospel, your word is powerful. It transforms lives, it transforms this city's life.

[36:36] Father, thank you for its work in our lives. Thank you for the transformation you brought about in us. And Lord, we pray that you'd help us to keep scattering that seed. We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen. We're going to sing two songs.