

Samaritans included in the Lord

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Date: 03 March 2024

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[0 : 00] Hi, everyone. So we're reading from Acts chapter 8 verses 1 to 25. I'll just give you a quick overview of chapter 7 because it gets straight into 8. So Stephen was taken in front of the Sanhedrin. He told them some hard truths and they didn't like it, so they stoned him and killed him. And there was a young man named Saul. Chapter 8. And Saul approved of his execution.

And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem. And they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church and entering house after house. He dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. For unclean spirits crying out with a loud voice came out of many who had them. And many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city. But there was a man named Simon who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all paid attention to him from the least to the greatest, saying, this man is the power of God that is called great.

And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed. And after being baptized, he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, give me this power also so that anyone whom I lay my hands on may receive the Holy Spirit.

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 neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.

[2 : 57] Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours and pray to the Lord. If possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.

And Simon answered, pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me. Now when they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.

Well, good morning, everyone. Will you pray with me as we come to God's word? Let's pray. Father, I pray that you'd teach each one of us more what it means to rejoice in the fact that our names are written in heaven.

And in Jesus' name I pray. Amen. Well, what makes somebody great? Would you agree with me that in our culture, we believe someone's great mainly based on their achievements, their results? So if doctor, da-da-da-da, their qualifications, their titles, project, manager, head of whatever, we look at their money.

[4 : 31] They've got more and more stuff. Look how great they are. We look at, like, I'm obviously getting old, but I'm only mid-30s, I think, but the influences culture, the fame, the popularity, they're

great because they're getting a following.

They're getting results. I think we can even do it as a parent. Look at my children. We look at position and power.

Aren't I great in this position, in this church? I've already hinted at the fact that we we can do it even in the church.

It's achievements. Like, I was thrown last week when I had to admit publicly that it was pretty obvious that I forgot to print the bulletins. Now, you guys went home and you couldn't care less, I'm guessing, but I cared because it was just this public failure.

Who cares? I know who cares. Obviously, I still care because I'm talking about it, but do you say, like, why? do I care? Because that failure, that sense of failure.

[5 : 53] We're going to see in our passage today that it is possible to put on all the church lifestyle, put on all the church lingo, you say all the things, and still be thoroughly committed to building up your own name, your own sense of greatness.

I think we see that in the story of Simon. The movement of the early church, like, this is a matter of months after Jesus died and was raised.

The movement, they had great achievements up until this point. The apostles were saying, Jesus is risen, he's ascended, he is the king that we've been waiting for.

In the last days, the proof of that is the spirit has come on all God's people. We've seen the success of all the internal threats to the church progressing have been overcome.

The hypocritical religion was stamped out. The disunity in the church was wonderfully changed, common concern for one another across cultural differences.

[7 : 04] All these internal threats, it was just success, achievement, and all these external threats of the religious leaders. The church kept growing. More numbers. They couldn't stop the converts pouring in, even among the priests.

And then we get this huge failure, apparent failure. Like, is Jesus really enthroned if Stephen is crushed by rocks?

What becomes of the spirit's teaching and signs through the apostles now that they are in Jerusalem and all the church is scattered?

What becomes of that? All this success through apostles and now the church is scattered. What happens? The joy in the church was replaced by fear of being put in prison and great lamentation for Stephen's death.

What are you doing, Lord? Well, he told us in chapter 1, verse 8, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

[8 : 21] This scattering that felt like God's curse was his means of blessing more people. All his people, we're told, except for the apostles, go into Judea and Samaria.

And verse 4, now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Instead of being filled with fear and just going, I'm going to keep my head down, I'm going to just live a safe life, all these believers just spoke about Jesus.

Instead of just the apostles having authority to proclaim the good news, all who were scattered preached. All the believers were gossiping the gospel.

And you can imagine happening. We're not told this, but you can imagine, why on earth are you here in Samaria of all places? Why are you in Judea? What's happened? What a wonderful opportunity to explain why they've been running for their lives.

Because the Messiah has come. They're all just gossiping the gospel. The word preached here, don't imagine what I'm doing now. That's not the word in the Greek. It's a different word.

[9 : 33] It's just, they're just telling, they're telling the good news. It's the word we get evangelised from. So, we see that it's not just the clergy, it's not just the apostles declaring this good news anymore.

It was Stephen and now Philip and it's all God's people who are declaring this good news, who have the authority to speak this good news. So, can I just encourage at this point, invite people to church to hear teaching.

Go for it, do it. But, trust that God has you in the relationships, in the situations he wants you.

You are best placed, not me, you are best placed to share why you've got peace and joy and hope in Jesus.

I think we've got to trust that you've got the authority of God to speak. Louisa's probably going to kill me after church, but I love the example, I've been humbled by Louisa's example this week.

[10:45] Even sick in hospital and she, I'll just be feeling rotten in hospital, but she was seeing these ladies she got to meet and wanting to minister to them.

I love that. Even in hardship, looking out for how to share the peace and hope that you've got. When the Christian missionaries were kicked out of China in the middle of the 20th century, it just seemed like the biggest devastation to China.

All the missionaries were pushed out, severe persecution, but it wasn't lost. The missionaries went to surrounding regions and the believers fledgling church there, they flourished.

They've gone from strength to strength. This Jesus is unstoppable. He can even use failures, defeats, loss to spread his life-giving word.

And so Luke's focus here is on the word of the Lord keeps going. And we're focusing on Philip. He's later called an evangelist. We saw him as a deacon, he's later an evangelist.

[12:07] And his message can be summed up in one word, verse 5. The Christ. That's his message. His signs remind us of Jesus.

Spiritual oppression, overcoming Satan, unclean spirits are driven out. And physical oppression, paralyzed, the lame are healed. It just reminds us of Jesus again, doesn't it?

We saw Jesus in the person of Stephen and now we're seeing him in Philip. Jesus is the hero of this story, working through Philip. In Jerusalem, there's moral outrage, but in this city, there's joy.

Even in dark days, Jesus is unstoppable. His word is continuing to spread through all the earth.

He's gathering in his lost sheep. All Jesus began to do, he's continuing to do.

Now this spread of the gospel was even more amazing when we remember who the Samaritans are. Now Luke says in verse 5, Philip went down to the city of Samaria.

[13:24] Now Luke, he's known for his very precise historical accuracy. He's known for it. So much of, anyway, I won't go into that now, but there wasn't a place called Samaria.

It was called Sebaste. I'm not sure how to pronounce that in his day. So he seems to want us to remember their historical, who they were historically.

It's a little indicator. Now you've probably heard, if you've heard a bunch of sermons before, you've heard the hatred between Jewish and Samaritans.

So I just want to go back into why they hated each other. Jews would go all the way around Samaria, walking around, just to avoid going into unclean territory.

Think of the parable of the Good Samaritan, which is so famous. Why does that parable work?

Because true love crosses even the barrier between Jews and Samaritans.

[14:24] Whoever you dislike, this is a true love in Jesus crosses those barriers. We learn of their origins back in 1 Kings 12.

David's son Solomon, in the later part of his reign, he starts taxing the northern tribes heavily. And then Solomon's son, Rehoboam, instead of correcting the injustice, he doubles down and he tries to use fear to keep them submissive.

But it doesn't work. They rebel. The northern tribes rebel and they break off. And even though God had promised that a son of David would be the forever king and bring blessing, the northern tribes reject David's line.

they set up their own king, Jeroboam. And instead of going back to the temple where God had said, meet me here, they set up two golden calves while claiming to keep worshipping Yahweh.

And then they create their false temple on Mount Gerizim. And so the Lord judges them through the Assyrian empire. taking some into exile.

[15:42] And the Assyrians also brought people from other nations to come live in Samaria so that they would learn their customs. They're mixed up in the religion of the world.

So they reject David's king. They build false temple with false worship and they're intermingling worship of Yahweh with just the customs of the world.

Really they're worshipping what the world does. they reject God's prophets. They only believe the first five books of the Old Testament that Moses wrote and they reject the rest.

Samaria was the capital city of these northern tribes. How impossible would it have been for a Samaritan to walk into Judea, into Jerusalem, to the temple and believe that God accepts them after all they've done?

Rejected his king, rejected his word, worshipping false gods. How could they possibly worship God shoulder to shoulder with Jews after all they've done?

[16:54] That's why it's so amazing that Philip, a Jew, would come into this place, this unclean territory and likely he was touched, we're not told this but probably he was touching those he was healing.

How unlikely that they would listen to his message. He's saying the Christ. Christ. They had rejected David's line.

How unlikely they would believe his message. The son of David has come. But many believe. Many are baptised, bowing the knee to King Jesus. That's what Jesus does. Humanly impossible divides he reconciles.

He reconciles the northern tribes and the southern. I think that's probably the likely reason why the Holy Spirit didn't come on them right away.

[18:14] Luke, throughout Acts, repentance, faith and receiving the Spirit go together. This is unusual. And so Luke's saying it's unusual.

It's not something we should create a church practice on of needing a second baptism or something like that. This is unusual.

And so I think the most likely explanation is God withheld his Holy Spirit until the apostles from the south come and lay their hands, authorised, saying there is true belief here.

It's that picture of reconciliation. God himself testifying by giving his Holy Spirit.

This is what Ezekiel, the prophet, said would happen in the last days. Ezekiel 37, 21-27. One king shall be king over them all.

[19:19] And they shall no longer be two nations and no longer divided into two kingdoms. They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols and their detestable things or with any of their transgressions, but I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned and will cleanse them.

And they shall be my people and I will be their God. My servant David shall be king over them and they shall all have one shepherd. They had no way back to the temple in Jerusalem so the temple came to them.

Jesus is the true temple. He washes them clean. He's reuniting his people. One kingdom, one sanctuary of the Spirit.

We're in the last days. That's the effect Jesus has. That's the fruit of faith in Jesus. It's reconciliation.

How much our world needs it. And then we come to this man, Simon. Who is this Simon character?

[20:36] Why does Luke spend so long on him? He spends, we get to know him well. Why does Luke want us to know Simon? Well, we're told in verses 9 to 13 he practiced magic.

Now, hopefully it's pretty obvious. We shouldn't picture what we think is magic of illusions that we know are illusions and magic tricks. This researcher, David Horne, has researched magic in Greco-Roman society.

He says magic was about managing supernatural powers in such a way that results are virtually guaranteed. So it's saying the right things.

It's doing the right processes. It's paying the right sum. It was getting guaranteed results. David Horne also says that people didn't use magic all the time.

They used it when the normal religious rituals couldn't deal with a person's situation. If you need protection, you need healing, you need success for something you want to do, you want harm for your opponents, if the normal institution couldn't help, people turn to magic for results.

[21:53] Now, I can't resonate very well with that worldview. I don't think in our materialistic, what you see is what is.

We can't resonate easily. But isn't the desire for guaranteed results easy to resonate with? Like, don't worry about how you get the results.

The means doesn't matter. Like, do a deal with the devil if you need to. The means doesn't matter. Results are all that matter. That feels very relevant today in our culture.

And I'm just, doesn't it trouble you that the power Simon thinks he's got with money is so related to this idea of magic?

I think we've got more in common with Simon than we might first think. Simon was the go-to guy.

[22:58] Verse 10, they all paid attention to him from the least to the greatest. He's the go-to guy.

Verse 11, it's emphasized again, they all paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. Who we give our attention to is a moral choice.

Because who we choose to give our attention to shows what we really value in life. I think we're told about Simon because Simon, he represents what the Samaritans value.

They praise him. He is at the top of their society. They call him great. Power of God. So I think Simon represents their worldview.

Power, control of a supernatural world to give guaranteed results. So I can see at least three main reasons Luke wants us to get to know Simon.

[24 : 16] The first, a bit of a secondary reason is I think to distinguish that the miracles Philip was doing were very different from magic. Very different.

The early church and Jesus himself was accused of that. So I think partly it's to just distinguish what was going on through the apostles from what Simon was doing.

Two other reasons I think. The second is Simon is a backdrop, he's a foil to see the genuine conversion of so many in Samaria.

They once paid attention to Simon but we're now told with one accord they pay attention to Philip. There's been a change.

Verse 11 to verse 12 makes that clearer. They paid attention to Simon, verse 12, but when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God in the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised.

[25 : 23] So when Peter and John came down and prayed for the converts to give them the Holy Spirit but the apostles reject Simon, we can be confident that the apostles really saw genuine faith.

They turned from what they once lived for and really did turn and pay attention to Jesus. So Simon being the focal point of their old life, he's a backdrop to true conversion.

This is a genuine movement of God going on, turning away from idols to the living God. I think the third reason we're told about Simon and the one I want to focus on is that Simon was a massive threat to this newly formed church.

Verse 13, he believed. Now, what we make of that, he must have accepted at some intellectual level the claims of the gospel.

He believed. He was baptised. He's in. He's in this movement. And he followed Philip around. But his actions later exposed that his heart had not changed.

[26 : 55] He seems to have tried to add Jesus onto his unchanged Samaritan worldview.

And he had a very big position in society. He's probably like the famous Christians we talk about going, isn't it great that so-and-so is a believer?

He had huge influence. He's inside the church apparently. Secondly, he could have led others to a superficial faith. I think it's a threat to this new movement.

So remember their worldview. Power, control over supernatural world to give guaranteed results to be someone great.

We see this in his offer to give money to the apostles. Verse 18 and 19, he wants the power. Give me this power.

[27 : 57] To control the Holy Spirit. To control God. To give guaranteed results that when I lay hands, they get guaranteed results.

They get the spirit. And we can presume, based off what we're told about him earlier, he wants to be great. He wants to be seen as great again.

The greats we saw in Jerusalem, in the council, they rejected Jesus to keep their power.

Now Simon in Samaria, he accepts Jesus to keep his power. But Jesus thwarts this threat to superficial religion.

Peter responds basically to hell with you and your money. It's strong language here.

[29 : 11] Your heart is not right with God. His baptism did him no good. Peter was calling him to repent.

See how enslaved you still are. Ask for forgiveness. And when you ask, don't think you're doing magic, saying the right words. If possible, you be forgiven.

Be brought to your knees, Simon. Realising God has to come and save you. So Jesus, through his apostles, stops this internal threat.

By unmasking this. Treating Jesus as useful. It's insincere. Insincere belief.

So what would Luke, what does Luke want us to learn from Simon?

[30 : 29] What are we meant to be learning from this? I doubt, I doubt any of us are guilty of the exact sin he tried to do.

I've never tried to offer money. I've never tried to offer money to have the ability to give the spirit. So I don't think it's the particulars we should be focusing on. But we do share this in common with Simon.

The gospel of the free gift of God must first destroy our attempts to be great by what we can offer. Despite all the public appearances of being in the church, Simon's commitment to self, his commitment to power, to control, to be someone great, had to be destroyed.

Salvation is a gift of God. Believing it's a gift must be devastating news before it's wonderful. It had to devastate those back in Jerusalem, like the Pharisees in the parable, who prayed, I thank you that I'm not like other people that I give and I do and I pray and I try, etc., etc.

[31 : 48] I'm someone great. It's got to destroy that. The free gift of God destroys that. It's also got to destroy the culture in Samaria.

It's got to devastate the boasting. I can control what I can achieve. I am someone great. That's what the free gift of God in the message of Jesus does.

It destroys all cultures, not just one or two cultures. It's got to first devastate before its wonderful news. A farmer in Connecticut in the US where I was born, Nathan Cole lived a long time before me, but lived in the Great Awakening in the 18th century.

He was listening to the powerful preacher George Whitefield. Here's his response after hearing the gospel from George Whitefield. My hearing him preach gave me a heart wound.

By God's blessing, my old foundation was broken up. And I saw that my righteousness could not save me.

[33 : 06] It's what the free gift of God has to do to each one of us. It's got to break up that foundation. You can't add Jesus onto your life.

He must destroy your foundation. Only then can you receive God's embrace of you. It's a totally free gift. And brothers and sisters, don't we have more of that foundation to be broken up?

And the freeness of this gift, I think it also gives us insight into how Jesus reconciles people.

Because both the Jewish and the Samaritan idea of greatness, by what you can offer God, is demolished.

The very thing that gives you that sense of superiority is just bulldozed. Jesus had to give his life to save Philip.

From his sense of moral achievement. And he had to give his life to save the people in Samaria.

Who trusted in control, power. We all share the same gift.

[34 : 39] Not one of us, not one culture, has offered anything to earn it. Finally, I think the freeness of this gift shows how great our God is.

David Bott isn't great. Simon's name isn't great. People who have rejected his king.

And rejected his word. And preferred the control and the praise of people trying to prove to be someone great. That God would provide a way back.

That he would give his son. He would give his Holy Spirit. That he would give life forever in his kingdom. That he would give his people to send into our lives to tell us this wonderful news.

It's just gift. All is a gift. His name alone is great.

[35 : 55] And when we believe that, the more we believe that, that's when peace and joy enters our heart. When Jesus Christ's name is great.

That's when peace and joy will enter this church more and more. It's not our name. It's Jesus' name that is great.

And don't we want that peace and joy in our city? And the promise is that peace and joy will be in all the world. Fully and forever one day.

We're going to be singing. With one accord. And it won't be my name. It won't be your name. It won't be our name. Grace and joy.

It'll be his name alone we're singing. Will you pray with me? Father, thank you for the times that you frustrate our plans to be seen as someone wonderful, someone great because of whatever we're trusting in.

[37 : 11] Thank you for the way you frustrate that so that we can come to you and receive the peace and joy that is found in just celebrating your free gift of knowing you of being part of your people of the promise of eternal life.

Lord, I pray that you'd break up our foundations that we're still clinging to more and more help us trust you when you do break that up. And I pray that you would lead us to rejoice more in the name of Jesus and that because of him our names are written in heaven.
In his name I pray. Amen.