

New Mission

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[0 : 00] May we see and understand the things that belong to our peace.

May we become firmer in our faith. Our commitment to you. And our devotion to Jesus, our Savior and our Master.

For his name's sake. Amen. Well, friends, you know what we're doing.

We are working our way through the Acts of the Apostles. The book which, as we have often said, might better be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

And even better, the Acts of the enthroned Christ. Managing the mission from his throne at the Father's right hand.

[1 : 20] And the passage set for us this morning is the first half of Acts chapter 8, which was read to us just now.

And we've been given a title, New Mission. And as you see when you look at the passage, it's mainly concerned with mission and ministry in Samaria.

First from Philip, one of the seven deacons who went to Samaria as a pioneer missionary preaching the gospel. And then the focus shifts to a man named Simon.

A sorcerer. A wheeler dealer. A self-promoter. Who is exposed as a man who really hadn't got to first base in discipleship.

Well, that's the ground that we're going to cover in this message. When I started working with the passage, I thought that I might construct a message that would compare the three S-men who are mentioned in this chapter.

[2 : 47] Stephen the martyr. Saul the persecutor. And Simon the sorcerer. But what finally crystallized in my heart was a couple of lessons for us about, in the first place, mission.

God's task on which we are all sent out. And second, motivation. God's test of all our hearts, whereby genuineness is discerned.

So let's work through those two lessons. First, about mission. This is focused for us in the first four verses.

On the day of Stephen's martyrdom, verse 1, a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem. And they were all scattered through the region of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

The apostles took the risk of staying in Jerusalem, I suppose to be the headquarters for the church, whatever that might cost them.

[4 : 07] But the rest of the church, well, was scattered. The persecution turned them into refugees. They had to leave home and go wherever they could find a place to rest their heads.

And look what it says in verse 4. Those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

That's the word which Philip was to preach in Samaria. You read it, read the details, verse 12. Philip preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ.

And that's the message, friends. That was the message then, and that's the message now. Good news about the kingdom of God. Yes, God the king is exercising his kingship.

And Jesus, the enthroned Lord, is exercising his lordship in extending the kingdom. The kingdom, which is the fellowship of those for whom Jesus is the king.

[5 : 27] It's a relational reality, you see. Wherever you have real faith in Christ and real loyalty to him, there you have the kingdom of God.

And what's happening in history, as I said, is that the Lord is extending his kingdom. And those who witness to Christ should make that plain.

This is really what's going on in the world. We don't see it, but it's in truth what's happening. And with that, we tell folk, as they allow us to do so, of Jesus Christ, the living Savior and Lord, who

became man, who died for our sins, who rose triumphantly and is now enthroned, and is, as I said, masterminding the mission from his throne.

And the purpose of sharing these things is to bring people to faith in the sense of understanding, knowledge, and faith in the further sense of personal commitment to Jesus, the living Lord.

And so, to bring people to conversion, so that they become real Christians. And if we ask, whose task is this?

[6 : 57] Well, we've already, by implication, answered the question. It's everybody's task. Even if you're going through a hard time, even if you're feeling pushed around by some persons or forces, as the persecution was pushing these Jerusalem Christians around, doesn't alter the fact that come rain, come shine, whatever the circumstances, we are on mission, you and I, morning, noon, and night every day.

And we should be looking constantly for opportunities to share the good news of the growing kingdom and the saving Lord, Jesus.

Where are we to fulfill our task of mission, we ask? And again, the answers implicit in what we have read.

Why did lay Christians from Jerusalem go throughout the region of Judea and Samaria, as it says in verse 1 they did?

Well, simply because it was open to them to go there, to get away from the persecution. But from their standpoint, I think I can say this positively, from their standpoint, they were going somewhere where there were folk who needed to know about Jesus Christ.

[8 : 31] That's how the world looks when you see it through Christian eyes. I will tell you, although it isn't good news at all, long, long ago, back in the 1930s, when I was being brought up, England was regarded by the English as top nation, and other nationalities were regarded as, in Kipling's phrase, lesser breeds.

We looked down on them, that's the awful truth. It was racism, and we didn't have a conscience about racism in those days. So we cheerfully talked about Italians as wogs, and Frenchmen as frogs, and so on, and we never thought twice about it.

That's just the way it is. The English are top. What more is there to be said? Well, thank God, all that sort of racist naivety is a thing of the past.

But in those days, it was difficult to take mission seriously as a project. I was brought up in church, regularly attending, Sunday by Sunday.

But we never heard anything about mission, never heard anything about missionaries.

Missionaries, in effect, who saw folk of all nations, tribes, and tongues as needy souls, to whom the gospel of Christ needs to be taken, they were thought of as oddities, really, and mainstream people wouldn't worry much about them.

[10 : 30] Well, thank God, all that is a thing of the past. When that sort of thinking prevails, you don't get much zeal for the mission, and the mission, in fact, in practice, doesn't take priority.

But today, when we acknowledge the equality of all human beings of all races, as folk made in God's image, and worthy of equal respect, you know, red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in his sight, as the children's missionary hymn of 150 years ago put it, Pioneer Way, well, the, how can I say it, the way is clear, intellectually, the way is clear, for us Christians to take mission more seriously than churchgoers used to do.

And that's the point that I want to underline. the Christians scattered from Jerusalem went anywhere and everywhere that they could find a place to stay, including Samaria.

Samaria was regarded as second class every way. Samaritans and Jews had been not on speaking terms for centuries.

But here you have Christians pioneering the new way of looking at folk. They went to Samaria and they proclaimed there the Christ.

[12 : 18] And Philip, Philip the deacon, went after them or with them and he too began a mission in Samaria preaching to those who'd been regarded previously as the untouchables.

Well, the lesson for us is a simple one. Are we in this? In the way that these Christians of Acts 8 were in this?

In mission, as we might say, up to our necks, in mission in terms of this being the priority of our lives. We've been saved by God's grace, sinners that we are.

We have a living Saviour and Lord and a hope of glory. This is to be shared. So, let's look into our hearts and ask ourselves honestly, are we as serious about spreading the gospel as we should be? Do we know our faith well enough to tell folk who need themselves to know about it? What the essential points are?

[13 : 36] In other words, are we equipped to be faithful witnesses to our Lord Jesus Christ? That's lesson number one. And now lesson number two has to do with motivation.

It's a very different lesson and it comes out of a very different sort of story. It's the story of Simon who prior to the arrival of the Christians in Samaria had been giving himself out to be a great man and had been acknowledged as a great man.

This man is the power of God which is called great. That's what they used to say about him. It's there in verse 10. And why was this? Well, because he was a magician.

And what that meant is more than we're told in any sort of detail. But you know what the general idea of a magician is.

A magician possesses supernatural powers that other people haven't got access to. And a magician can work wonders which other people can't.

[14 : 59] Simon was some sort of a magician. Well, of course, for entertainment, we have magicians today. People in the tradition of Houdini, people like David Copperfield.

They call themselves, in honesty, from time to time, illusionists, and that's what they are. It's all an illusion, really, and it may well be that Simon's magic was illusions, too.

But that isn't the way that the Samaritans regarded him. And when Philip came to town preaching Christ, and God blessed Philip's ministry as God did, it says, verse 12, you see, they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, and they were baptized, both men and women.

And even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized, he continued with Philip. Now, here's a thing to note about Luke, Luke writing the book of Acts in his character as a historian.

He uses lots of words in the way that historians, rather than Christians, use them. That's simply because, so I believe, he's writing for publication and he wants to be read as a responsible historian.

[16 : 42] And he says they believed, and what he's talking about there is not in any way an account of what really went on in their heart and inside them.

He's simply saying they professed faith. That's the historian's use of the word, you see. They professed faith, so it looked at least as if they were real Christians, and no doubt many of them were.

Simon himself believed. He professed faith. He went through the motions. he was baptized. Yes, but Simon, I believe, on the basis of what happened next, Simon had processed Philip's ministry in terms of Philip being another magician.

Simon didn't quite understand what sort of magician. But that, I'll say again, is how he processed Philip's ministry. Philip preached Jesus Christ, and Philip, by the power of God, wrought signs and great miracles, there they are in verse 13.

Simon processed that as Philip, the super magician, offering, offering the first of the two things that magicians do offer.

[18 : 26] There's patter, and there's performance, in what magicians do. Now, the patter is what they say, and sometimes that's intended to mislead you so that you don't notice what they're doing, and sometimes it's intended to impress you.

The older sort of magician would rattle on about some very wise instructor who had taught him the various magic things that he's now going to show you, and so on.

I suppose that Simon heard what Philip said about the Lord Jesus in those terms. Patter, preparing for the performance, and then the performance was the great signs and the great miracles.

And Simon, it says, continued with Philip, because Simon was a professional magician, and Simon wanted to learn the tricks, the tricks I mean, of Philip's trade.

And, well, you know how the story continues. When the Samaritan believers had been baptized, nothing like the signs that the Holy Spirit displayed at Pentecost in Jerusalem took place.

[19 : 58] One asks why? Well, the short answer, I think, I believe it's clear in Acts, although a lot of people miss it. The answer is that Jesus began a ministry and a fellowship and founded a church through the apostles, which was Jewish to the core.

Jesus, in the course of his own ministry, you remember, it said to the Samaritan lady in John chapter four, salvation is of the Jews. And what God was planning to do, and actually did do, in Samaria, was to show, by withholding tongues and all of that, God, until Peter and John had come down from Jerusalem and laid hands on the converts, God was showing, yes, salvation is from the Jews.

Jews. And the positive point here is that there's only one church, the church that Jesus and the apostles are the founders of.

There's only one body of Christ. There's only one Christian fellowship. The Samaritans, who rejected, up to this point, the thought of Jewish leadership, the Samaritans had to humble themselves and accept the fact that it's from the Jews, according to the pattern of God's action, that salvation has come and that leadership in the young church is now coming.

So, the manifestations of the Holy Spirit were withheld until Peter and John had come down and laid hands on them. Simon saw all this and processed it in the same way that he processed what he heard from and saw in Philip's case.

[22 : 16] And Simon took Peter apart and, as we're told, said to him, give me also this power that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit, that is, receive the signs, the manifestations of the Spirit, in the way that they're doing when you lay hands on them.

In other words, this is a good trick. I want it in my repertoire. So, I'll pay you if you just show me how it's done. Can you wonder that Peter was not impressed?

Peter was a spiritual man and he saw through this. And in the words that he spoke to Simon, it's very obvious that he's seen through it.

Verse 20, Peter said to Simon, your silver perish with you, because you thought that you could obtain the gift of God with money.

This is the gift of God. I am ministering and God is, I am ministering for God and God is ministering through me. And this is not something that can become part of a secular magician's repertoire.

[23 : 46] No, Luke's report of what Peter said goes on. You have neither part nor lot in this matter. This is Peter beginning to say, I can see Simon that you're not really converted.

Your heart hasn't really been changed. You don't understand what Christianity is really all about. It's a new life centered on Christ and coming from Christ and there's no room in it for self promotion in the manner of a professional magician.

What's called for is self denial, humility, and exalting Jesus, not yourself. You have neither part nor lot in this matter, says Peter, for your heart is not right before God.

In my reading this morning, I came across the words from Proverbs 27 verse 19, the heart reflects the real person.

Oh, how true that is, brothers and sisters. The heart reflects the real person. Simon is revealing what's in his heart and what's in his heart reflects the real person.

[25 : 10] Here he is, a man who has misunderstood the gospel, a man who hasn't entered into real faith at all, a man who's into the motions of Christianity for what he can get out of them, a man who's seeking to exploit the saving work of God for his own advantage, to make himself appear even greater as the power of God in Samaria.

No, says Peter, your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours. You know what repent means?

It isn't just a matter of beating your breast and saying sorry, it's a matter of turning your back on the error that you were enmeshed in before.

repent, walk away from it, repent of this wickedness of yours and pray to the Lord. That's the Lord Jesus all through this chapter.

The Lord is Jesus. If you run through it, you'll see. Pray to the Lord Jesus that if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.

[26 : 32] For I see that you're in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity. You're still captive to sin. And Simon replied, Pray to me for the Lord that nothing of what you've said may come upon me.

Simon reveals now that he doesn't know how to pray. Whatever else he's been doing as he's followed Philip around, he hasn't learned to pray.

He hasn't, in other words, got a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus at all. It's all coming out now, you see. We don't know how Simon's personal story ends.

Luke doesn't tell us. Luke's point is that by his error, Simon showed very clearly that the gospel and the power of God in and through the gospel is something of a different order and on a different footing altogether from the spurious, superstitious performances of the magician.

Well, you can see out of this, I'm sure, the second question that comes to us, jumps at us really and gets us by the throat. What's our motivation in the Christian profession that we make?

[28 : 03] The church going that's become part of the pattern of our lives, the Christian identity that we parade, at least, in church on Sunday.

if the motivation is self, if at the bottom line, so to speak, at the bottom level of the heart, it has to be said that we are in it for what we think we can get out of it, and are seeking to make God, make our Lord Jesus, a convenience for our own self-advancement.

Well, brothers and sisters, then there's something radically wrong with our hearts still, and we need some advice and some treatment, and a radical change.

But if right down at the bottom of our hearts, in the deep reality of who we are, we can honestly say, I live now for Christ, who died to save me, and now lives to transform me, and lead me, I am not in it for selfish reasons, I am in it to glorify Jesus and to glorify his heavenly Father.

If we can say that, well, that's reality, friends, that's spiritual reality, reality, that's the measure of the transformation that has taken place in our lives since we came to know Christ, because we didn't start like that.

[29 : 49] This is the transformation that is wrought through conversion. if, by the grace of God then, we are not phonies in the way that Simon was a phony, as a Christian, we should be thanking God for his work of grace in our lives, and we should be renewing our commitment to him, to work in the work of mission, just as we were speaking of a few minutes ago.

Simon's story is a warning. Simon is a bad example. Luke thinks it very important that we should see Simon, he tells the story in full, so that we can see Simon.

Simon's a phony, can you recognize phoniness? Can you recognize it in yourself? this story is told to help us check that we are not phonies in the manner of Simon.

Well, God make us honest with ourselves and honest to him in this matter. God make us all really real as new creatures in Christ.

And God lead us forward in the life into which he's called us. And if there's an element of persecution in it, as there may be, of course, we don't know what the outcome of the legal case is going to be yet.

[31 : 32] But even if there's pressure that feels like persecution, it mustn't make any difference. New creatures in Christ are to be engaged on the new mission, a mission which takes us to folk in need of Christ, wherever we go, whoever they are.

That's how it's meant to be, and that's the life to which we're all of us called. Well, ponder these things, brothers and sisters, as Acts 8 summons us to do.

And God bless us all. Amen. Amen. Please kneel in prayer. Father, after a somber week in which we gratefully remembered the sacrifices made in an unending series of wars, we come today with that thankfulness incredibly enhanced when we think of Jesus and the sacrifice he made for us.

We thank you for its completeness. Jesus, his job is done, his victory won, and won for all time and for all people.

For us, that means we can approach you in prayer to confess our sins and know that they are blotted out through his blood shed on the cross. We thank you that through Jesus' death and resurrection, death was vanquished.

[33 : 09] and so we look forward in hope instead of clinging to the transitory goodies of this world. We thank you that salvation is a gift that keeps giving and giving and that Jesus left us a comforter, our eternal, I'm sorry, our internal Christ, to bring all things into our memory and to transform us from the hopeless people we once were, to the hopeful ones we are as we look forward, to the time when we shall stand as redeemed people, perfect in front of you.

May that incredible hope govern our lives, no matter what current concerns might weigh us down. we pray that as we keep looking forward, that you give us the same spirit of fervency that the early Christians showed in the book of Acts.

Give us the same bravery. Give us the same vision. And particularly we ask that you will enable those we think of as our missionaries, such as Ritchie Spidell of Navigators, Kirsten Rumery of Living Waters, Catherine Ginnett in Campbell Rivers, Sharon Thompson of the Wycliffe Bible

Translators, Brian McConachie of Ratanac who works in Cambodia, and Doug and Maria Graham in Southeast Asia.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. we ask that we and they will declare your salvation in many hostile and not so hostile places.

We ask that you will make us understand that we are missionaries as well to the world around us, a world that frequently doesn't want to hear anything of you.

[35 : 22] Father, we acknowledge the tremendous debt we owe the faithful people you've put in leadership over us.

We thank you for their spirit of sacrifice, particularly when we make them listen to our questions and worries time and time again. We thank you for the economic sacrifice they make when they work for the church.

Help us to value and cherish them. Carry them on your eagle's wings and help them see the land ahead and communicate to us where you want us to go.

And so we pray for them and for all of us that you will fill us with your grace and knowledge so that we all may be pure and blameless and filled with the spirit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to your glory and praise.

Lord, in your mercy. Hear our prayer. We thank you for the lessons in today's sermon and we see with awe that you are extending your kingdom around the world and that you use us to do it.

[36 : 43] Change our attitudes as radically as you did the wogs and fogs, 1930 British ones, so that we understand that everyone needs the gospel, whether they live on the Crescent, on the downtown east side, or places in between.

Make us serious about spreading the gospel and being faithful witnesses to our Lord Jesus Christ. Secondly, Lord, we thank you for the lesson of Simon.

Be with those of us who don't know the reality of you and sit in church practicing a fake Christianity. Be with us who operate on patter.

Give us a genuine hunger for the real you. Open our hearts and minds, we pray. Lord, give us discernment to know the fake and reality.

Father, as a church, we yearn for those who live in that unreality. Bring them to you, we ask. Bring us all to a true understanding of you.

[38 : 03] Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. God, we pray for those who are ill amongst us.

Harold, Yvette, Margaret, Stephen, George, Gail, and for others who are known to help us personally, and for whom now, in a moment of silence, we ask for.

we ask that you will ease their pain and fill them with the hope of seeing you face to face, whether it's in the immediate future or a distant one.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. lastly, Father, we thank you for the joy of loving you that comes from our Lord Jesus.

It makes dull, gray, rainy November days endurable because you go with us no matter what we do, whether we go boarding at Cypress or trolling for treasures at Lucky Dollar, or the more mundane activities like school or shopping.

[39 : 31] Father, we are so thankful that you are with us always. We love you. We're grateful for the obedience and sacrifice of Jesus.

Use us, we ask, to extend your kingdom. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.