

# New Mission

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, if you would, it will probably help you out to keep this cream-colored sheet out with the Bible reading in front of you as we go along. Psalm 16, 11 says that in the presence of the Lord there is fullness of joy.

And this week as I was looking at our story tonight about Simon and the coming of the gospel to Samaria, I realized there was a few different kind of themes we could draw out from this talk. We could talk a lot about kind of the formations of the early Christian church. We could talk a bit about the ethnic relationship and tensions between the Jews and the Samaritans and what that means for the inclusive nature of the gospel that in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile.

And we could talk a lot about the giving of the Spirit. But as I prayed through this and looked at it, I decided I think I want to look at this through a different lens. And I want to look at it through the lens of joy.

So I want joy to be our guiding theme that takes us through this account. The account of the conversion of the people of Samaria to the gospel of Christ.

[ 1 : 12 ] So there's a few things. I'll just throw them out here at the beginning and then we'll flesh them out. There's a few things I want us to see. One being that joy comes to Samaria through the proclamation of the gospel.

Through the spread of the gospel, joy comes to Samaria. And then after that, I want to look at Simon. Simon the magician. And see how he's given to us. I think it's a bit of a warning. We see how he lusts after the power of God, yet his heart remains completely unchanged. And what we're going to see is that an unchanged, unrepentant heart will forever keep us from experiencing the fullness of joy.

Like the psalmist says, that in the presence of the Lord is fullness of joy. So that's where we're going. And before we go any further, let's pray together. Father, in your presence is complete joy. And so we ask that your spirit would be with us tonight, filling our hearts and our lives with your joy. We ask for open, humble, repentant hearts that receive the great gift of your spirit and are transformed into your likeness as a result.

[ 2 : 21 ] We ask this in Christ's name and for his glory. Amen. Amen. So we're in the book of Acts. Kind of an ongoing story that we've been tracking with for the last few months.

In Acts 1.8, you'll remember that Jesus says, You'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And tonight we arrive at Samaria.

But before we got there, you know the church grew by hundreds and thousands. We've seen rapid growth and expansion of the Christian church. And as it grows, at the same time we've seen a bit of persecution start to rise.

And the apostles are imprisoned and brought before religious leaders and questions. And last week we looked at the stoning of Stephen. And we've seen this persecution now reach all the way to actual death.

Not just the threat of persecution or the threat of death, but it's a reality. And so I think before we go into this story of Samaria, we need to let that sink in.

[ 3 : 27 ] We need to realize that it's through the persecution of the church that the church grows and expands. But we need to realize the significance of that.

I mean, we've actually seen Christians being killed for their faith. And following Christ would have gone against every established norm and custom and structure that they would have lived within. And if there's any point in which the Christian faith would have died out, I think once you see someone publicly stoned to death, that might be when I would kind of bow out and say, you know, this has been fun, but I'm going back.

But it's not what we see, is it? The early Christians, our brothers and sisters, they find the pearl of great price, and they're willing to give up everything to obtain it, even their very lives.

And that's what we saw so beautifully with Stephen. And it's in Stephen's martyrdom that we see these Christians begin to spread. We see them move into the region of Samaria. And we see the gospel boldly proclaimed as they go.

[ 4 : 29 ] And so our story tonight is kind of broken into two parts. You have verses 1 to 8, and you have the rest, 9 to 25. And so I think Luke presents to us the story of the conversion of Samaria in two different ways.

We're first given kind of a bit of a general overview of what it was like when the gospel came to Samaria under the teaching of the deacon, Philip.

And on the whole, the picture we see is quite compelling. You see him come and boldly proclaim Christ, and you see him cast out demons, and you see him restore those who are lame and bring transformation to the city.

And I don't want us to miss that, because it is a very positive picture. But we also, at the same time, are given a warning. Verse 9 begins with the word, but. It's kind of saying, here's this great thing that happened in Samaria, but don't forget about what happened with Simon.

I was thinking about this, and it's kind of if you were a contractor, and you built a beautiful home, and you were taking, I don't know, some apprentices or something through it and showing it off. It's this beautiful home, and it's finished, and you're showing it to them, but you still would take the time to go down and show in the foundations when it was first being built that in all your equipment and your lumber, there was a rotten board that got in, and it got replaced, and it didn't compromise the home, but there was still a teaching moment, and it was a time that the contractor maybe could say, you know, here's a warning, here's a warning to make sure your foundations are secure.

[ 5 : 57 ] And I think something like that is what we see tonight. Tonight, I think Luke says, you know, be encouraged by the proclamation and the spread of the gospel in Samaria, but don't forget the account of Simon, because with it comes a great warning and a great challenge for us as the church as we go forward.

So we're given the 30,000-foot view, and then we're given a specific event to help us with this. So first, let's just look at those first eight verses and get kind of the general conversion of Samaria under our belts before we go further.

And like I said just a minute ago, what really stands out for me is this theme of joy. It stands out that in the evangelization of the Samaritans, great joy comes upon that city.

Verse 8. And remember, these people coming, these Christians coming into Samaria, they were refugees themselves. They've been driven out of their land. And I can imagine they surely showed signs of that.

They had to be visibly upset by the persecution they've experienced. But at the same time, you see clearly their spirits were full of life.

[ 7 : 13 ] They were full of the joy of the Lord. And there was something about them, even in spite of their being forced out of their home and being persecuted that is very compelling to the people in Samaria.

When they preach the gospel and they see the healing and restoration that comes with it, they believe Christ. They find these Christians, even in showing, you know, as they live, that it's hard to follow Christ, that it comes with a cost.

They still say that this is something worth getting on board with. And I think in this story, one thing that stands out for me is that it's good to see that both the preaching of the gospel and physical restoration are instrumental in the bringing of joy to Samaria.

I think we need to hold those together. What you see is it's not just empty words without any connection to reality. And it's not just these powerful experiences that are separated and divorced from truth and any underlying meaning.

They go together. And what you see is the kingdom of God is breaking into Samaria in word and in action, in what's said and in what's seen and in what's experienced.

[ 8 : 28 ] So I think essentially what Philip says to these people is that Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again, and it has significant direct implications on your life here and now.

He's saying the kingdom of God is not an abstract, disembodied concept. He's saying it has real, temporal, physical implications here and now.

And I think in speaking of the coming kingdom of God and in light of this conversion of a city, we need to remember the effect that sin has had on creation and it's had on us, that it affects every area of creation.

And so when the gospel comes to Samaria, just as when it comes to us and it comes to Vancouver, it must affect every area in need of healing, every bit of life that's been touched and corrupted by sin, which is most clearly seen in our hearts and our lives, but it affects every bit of the world, which is now under decay and death as a result of our rebellion.

So we need to not fall into the trap of thinking that faith is limited to cognitive, rational assent to a set of doctrines or beliefs.

[ 9 : 43 ] There certainly is that, but it's not limited just to that. Christ is our example. He calls us to live out an embodied faith where we are following Him with our life. And when the gospel is proclaimed to our neighbors and to our communities and to our cities, it affects the whole society in a visible, powerful way.

And what Christ was doing by His Spirit in Samaria, He's doing tonight as well in our city, and that's that He's bringing the restorative work of His kingdom into this creation, which we see first and most primarily in His resurrection, where He conquers death by defeating death by death.

Now, I don't want to overemphasize this visible, powerful manifestation of the kingdom at the expense of what we've been talking about with the renewal and regeneration.

We need to definitely affirm that the gospel consists of turning away from the life of sin and the life of death. It involves putting our hope in Christ, and it involves belief.

It involves taking seriously who Christ has shown Himself to be and who Christ says that He is. We cannot separate the kingdom of God from a life of holiness and a life of renewal and repentance.

[ 11 : 10 ] So let's make sure we hold these together. They're very important for us. And I think in talking about the warning and Simon S. warning, I think He's given because we see that He separates these two.

He doesn't hold these together. He shows us what happens when someone gets completely caught up in the power of the Spirit but separates it from the gospel. He separates it from repentance and life transformation, from conforming our hearts and our lives to the will of God.

Instead, Simon sees the power at work around him, and he separates it from the very purpose for which it was displayed. And remember verse 8.

If this does happen, I think in a very real sense it threatens for us, as it threatened for Simon, to steal away the joy that Christ so desperately longs to bring into our hearts.

The joy that's experienced by the very presence of God in our lives. So in the time we have left, let's spend some time looking at the story of Simon the Magician.

[ 12 : 18 ] See how we can take him as a bit of a warning for us. And see how he can help us to keep from losing sight of the gospel and losing sight of the experience of the joy of the Lord.

St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians in chapter 4, he asks them point blank, what has happened to all your joy? And I think for us we must pray, Lord have mercy and keep us from ever having those words come over us.

Keep us from ever losing the joy of full communion with you. And so Simon the Magician. Simon, Simon. Let's do a bit of a case study, if you will, with old Simon here.

One of the first things we know about Simon is that he's a magician. But I don't want you to then go and think that Simon ran around Samaria, spending most of his time at little Samaritan boys and girls' birthday parties, and pulling bunnies out of hats and doing cards and stuff.

And he wasn't the guy, and you know who he is, and you may be that guy. He always has the deck of cards in his pocket and goes to a party and still thinks that card tricks are really cool. And so he pulls you away and, you know, hey, look, you pick a card, and seven of clubs, and he knows it.

[ 13 : 35 ] Well done. Yep. Simon's not running around Samaria doing card tricks. He's really not. In the ancient world, magic was a pretty big deal. And it was magic of a sort that we kind of have all but forgotten, and we laugh at, and we kind of relegate to Harry Potter, and kind of that world, the world of movies.

But for Simon, the goals of his magic would have been quite serious. He hoped to heal diseases. He would have seen himself as bringing blessings and curses upon people, and would have used his magic to protect himself, defend himself from the demonic or curses that may come upon him.

And so in doing this, I mean, it was quite literally more like sorcery or wizardry that you might think of. They would use books with incantations in them, and they would have magical objects that they would use.

So maybe instead of Simon the magician, maybe Simon the wizard or Simon the sorcerer or something is more helpful. It doesn't quite capture it for us, but I think it's getting closer to what we're getting at, and I don't want to belabor the point.

What we see in verse 9, and moving on, is that Simon was actually a bit more than just a pander of cheap tricks. His magic clearly amazed the people, and it commanded their attention.

[14:59] They said he was great, they said he was powerful, and they even said that his magic came from God. And Simon, in all the modesty that we could expect of him, kind of says the same stuff about himself.

He says he himself was somebody great. So that again gives us a bit of an understanding of who Simon is, a bit of his character and a bit of his motives. If you will, it shows us why Simon was in the magic business.

And this entire story, from verses 9 to 25, it's kind of surrounded in this language of power, and the demonstration of power.

And I think Simon, he liked the power that came from being into magic. He liked the power that he held over people. I think it maybe validated him, maybe gave him a sense of control, gave him meaning, gave him purpose.

But everything we see with Simon is that it was self-fulfilling, self-motivated, self-reflective, and self-serving. It was all about him. Magic was for Simon and what he got out of it.

[16:02] It made more of him, and it gave him more value and more worth. And so into this scene, into Simon and Samaria, enter Philip and enter the gospel of Christ, like we've already been talking about.

And Philip comes, and he doesn't only proclaim Christ, but he comes casting out demons. He comes doing remarkable signs in Christ's name.

He comes healing the sick, restoring the blind, and so on and so forth. You see throughout the New Testament, these examples of the apostles and their disciples doing great things in Christ's name. And so I think for Simon, this would have piqued his interest, because these guys are doing to him the very same stuff that he's doing. They're in the same business. And so for Simon, these guys, they've got a lot more power than he does, and so it's almost like there's a new sheriff in town, maybe a new wizard in town or something.

And in saying that, I don't mean to say that the entire conversion of Samaria was corrupt.

Remember that the general overview that we're given is quite positive, and I think the full transforming gospel of Christ definitely, definitely came to Samaria then.

[17:14] But by listing Simon in that conversion, by listing Simon as one of those who was baptized, we need to realize that his conversion at the best was partial and incomplete.

And I think all this is getting back a bit to what we were saying a few minutes ago. Simon saw the transforming power of God, but he separated it from a gospel of repentance.

Simon didn't see that power affects the city around him, but it also is to affect your heart, and that the two are vitally linked.

And so in verse 13, we see that seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed. It was the demonstration of the work of the Spirit that caught Simon's attention.

And so then when we see the apostles Peter and John come to Samaria, this portrait I'm painting of Simon really is only confirmed.

[18:16] So let's pick up in verse 17, when the apostles lay 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 on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.

It's kind of like Simon saying, hey, hey, remember me? I used to be a magician too. We're kind of into this together. Love what you're doing. Love your work. Let you come into my city.

I'm on board. But I kind of want in. Don't forget me. I'm happy to pay. I'm happy to pay you top dollar for it. But I definitely want in.

I want to be doing what you're doing, so I will pay you and then give me the power you have. And then Peter responds to this in verse 20. 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. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours and pray to the Lord that if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.

[ 19 : 38 ] And I think here Peter hits the nail squarely on the head in that he says, it's all about your heart, Simon. Your money is useless in this case. The Spirit's not a commodity to be bought and sold.

And even in emphasizing in this context that the Spirit's a gift, I think he draws this out. You don't buy gifts. They're freely given. It's the Father's delight to give the gift of His Spirit to the church just as it was His delight to send His Son to rescue us from sin and from death.

And there's absolutely no denying the beauty of the gift that the Spirit is. The Spirit is the very life of the church. And through the church, the Spirit is at work restoring the entire created order.

And therefore, for us, then as a part of the church, the church exists to bring life to the world. But Simon saw this life in Samaria and then tried to control it and co-opt it for his own purposes and his own desires and motives.

Now friends, we don't get on board with what God's doing by identifying His power and seeing Him at work and then trying to steal it away and buy it from Him for our own uses.

[ 20 : 58 ] As Peter shows us, we participate in the gift of God through humble obedience. We ask for forgiveness and humble our hearts and ask to be right before God.

We ask for forgiveness for the corruption that's inside of us, for choosing death over life time and time again. We must repent for how we've tried to use the power of God instead of allowing the experience of His gift to change us from within.

I was reminded a bit of this this week when I spent a few days along with Jim and a few other guys at Niagara Falls in Ontario for the Synod, Anglican Network Synod.

And I must say straight away, I am an American, but the Canadian view of the falls is so much better. If you've been, anybody been to Niagara Falls? Yeah, it's a lot better.

But there were two things that struck me when I went to Niagara Falls. The first was the beauty of the falls, the sheer power and majesty that just sucks you in and you cannot escape it.

[ 22 : 04 ] But at the same time, at least on the Canadian side, I'll say I'm sure it's on the American as well, lest I sound biased. There's this rampant, tacky consumerism that is just everywhere.

Next to our hotel, we saw, I want to say, five or six wax museums, Ripley's Believe It or Not, the WWF retail store, the Burger Kings in the shape of Frankenstein. I mean, you get the idea.

It's pretty bad. But all this, it kind of makes up the Niagara Falls experience. And it's part of the attraction of the falls.

But as I was walking along the water and I finally got to the falls and stood over them and looked down, all that just fades away because the attraction of Niagara Falls is the falls. It's the power of the falls that stays in my memory and will stay in my experience there and what I'll take away from that.

And I feel like some of the stuff that's built up around it just tries to take the power of the falls and steal it away for its own ends. And what it ends up doing, I feel, is dampening a bit of the experience of the falls in and of themselves.

[ 23 : 13 ] And it's not a perfect analogy, but I think it helps us see a bit of what's going on with Simon. In our spiritual lives, we can see the power of the spirit at work in the healing and the restoring of the world and we try and use this power to maybe validate our own lifestyle instead of thinking of the salvation that the power of the spirit brings and the healing of others and ultimately the glory of God.

We must not think of the power of the spirit as something that's at our disposal. The spirit of God is not ours to use in our back pocket like a deck of cards. The spirit doesn't empower our own ambitions and desires, but we come in humility to experience the spirit of God because it's only in this way that we find true life and this is the only way that you and I experience the fullness of joy that the Lord so longs to bring.

And so just in closing, let's look at verse 24, Simon's response to the apostles. He says, Pray for me to the Lord that nothing of what you have said may come upon me. And in spite of all that Simon's done wrong in this story and I think his response here still is incomplete at best because he, I mean you see he can't even pray for himself.

He asked them to pray. But I think he's getting us towards the appropriate direction we need to be going in that when corrected about or given a warning about how we may abuse the spirit or how we may forget and lose sight of how the spirit transforms us and conforms us to the image of Christ, we should respond with humility and we should respond with repentance.

Repentance needs to be the posture of our hearts. We need to ask the Lord to have mercy on us as a community and as a church if we ever separate the power of the spirit from the transformed heart and life that he tries and longs to bring to us.

[ 25 : 17 ] We need to ask the Lord to keep us focused on others focused on the transformation of our communities and the good of our neighbors. And above all we need to keep our eyes focused on Christ in whom we live and move and find our very being.

So the fullness of joy the fullness of life it doesn't come when we see the power of God at work and try and use it for our own ends. The fullness of joy comes when we open ourselves up to the purposes of God and it's there that we find this fulfillment and this peace the satisfaction and the joy of our Lord.

Amen. Amen.