

Lesson 11: Acts 8:1-24 The Samaritan Awakening

Introduction

The story of Stephen's witness to Christ and resulting death served several purposes for Luke. Theologically, the story challenges the worship and practice of Orthodox Judaism to yield to the lordship of Jesus Christ and accept in him the fulfillment of the Old Covenant and inauguration of the New Covenant. Literarily, Stephen's story serves as an overlapping transition from the first major division of Acts to the second major division of Acts, moving from a description of the Church's growth in Jerusalem to a description of the spread of the Church into Judea and Samaria. Historically, Stephen's story is our story. His conviction, his courage, his hope that "to live is Christ and to die is gain," that truth and character displayed in his story is part of our heritage as Christians. He is "our" Stephen. Also, historically, his story is a pivotal moment. Before Stephen's trial the authorities in Jerusalem restrained themselves from the use of force against the growing Christian movement. At the conclusion of Stephen's trial violence is unleashed.

Believers in Jesus were lighting a fire in Jerusalem, a large bonfire full of warmth and light, calling all who believe to gather around in fellowship and worship. Outside that community gathered around the light there are thousands looking in, many attracted by what they saw, by the fellowship and the miracles, and the message. Others stood outside with judgment, disapproval, jealousy and hatred. The trial of Stephen unleashed that hatred. The leaders of Jerusalem took advantage of the moment to continue the violence. They marched in with strong boots to stamp out the blazing fire.

In kicking out the fire, embers are launched into the surrounding region. Will those embers fall on damp, rocky soil only to lose their light and warmth with no effect? No. The surrounding countryside will catch fire as believers are forced out from Jerusalem. Judea, Samaria, the coastal cities, Galilee, even as far north as Antioch, persecuted Christians will spread the message of the Good News of Jesus Christ. We begin here with the awakening of Samaria.

We can divide Acts 8:1-24 into three sections. We start with an introduction, then we read about Philip's fruitful witness in Samaria, and then we read about Peter's apostolic affirmation that God is, indeed, at work in Samaria. Rather than read the whole text at once, we will address these three sections individually, starting with the introduction in Acts 8:1-3.

Introduction of the Gospel Spread Outward (8:1-3)

¹ Saul was in hearty agreement with putting [Stephen] to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. ³ But Saul *began* ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.

Saul as the Embodiment of Jewish Animosity Toward Jesus

Luke gives us more information about Saul. That is his Hebrew name. We find out in the letter to the Philippians that he was of the tribe of Benjamin, the tribe that produced the famous King Saul that came before King David. Maybe he is named after the king or some other relative. It was an honored name in the tribe of Benjamin. Paul is not a new name that Saul will receive. Paul is his Greek name. This is not a new name with a new meaning like the one Peter got. This is like my friend Biljana who goes by Bibi when she is in the States, so that Americans can pronounce her name. Paul works better for Greek speakers. Luke will start calling Saul, Paul when the gentile ministry gets fully under way. Since we know him as Paul, I'll start referring to him as Paul now. I might flip back and forth between Paul and Saul.

Luke mentioned Paul at the end of chapter 7. He is giving us more information about Paul now, introducing us, like he does, to Paul before Paul's story truly gets underway. Paul is not simply one major figure of Acts that is being introduced here. Paul is the primary human figure in the story of Acts. If Acts were a novel or a play, we would say that Paul is the hero of the story, similar to how Moses is the primary human figure in Exodus. Of course, God and Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are the main focus of the story. But as far as human beings go, this is very much a story about Paul. One of the main purposes of Acts is the defense of Paul, which, at the same time and more importantly, is a defense of the Gospel of Jesus Christ promoted by Paul.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a Gospel of changed lives. That is no more clearly displayed than in the life of Saul. The Hebrew of Hebrews who would come to be known exclusively by his Greek name because of his ministry to the Gentiles. But first, we meet Paul watching over the robes of Stephen's executioners, which they removed so that they might better throw the stones that crush Stephen to death. This is not an origin story of repentance, or self-doubt, or revulsion at the unjust evil being carried out before his eyes. This is not the moment that moves Paul softens or begins to empathize. Luke tells us, "Saul was in hearty agreement with putting [Stephen] to death." He watched with righteous indignation. He watched as a protector of Israel, as a defender of the faith. Not only did he completely reject Stephen's Gospel message, but he fully agreed with the sentence of death and the immediate execution of that sentence. He had no qualms about the shift from formal trial to mob attack. This was righteous in his eyes. Paul was in hearty agreement.

In the death of Stephen, Paul sees clearly his calling from God to lead in the eradication of this cancerous Christian tumor growing in the heart of Israel. He begins to ravish the Church. That is a violent word. He enters into the private space of people's homes, knocking on doors, as we might imagine from the KGB or the Gestapo. With the approval of the government and certainly also with Temple soldiers backing him up, Saul dragged Christian mothers and fathers from their homes, from their children to lock them in prison. We can imagine that he would have done worse if the Roman authorities allowed the Sanhedrin to execute Christians. But apart from blasphemy in the Temple, the quick execution of Stephen is an exception to the rule. So, the worst Paul can do is drag these believers into prison.

Persecution Leading to the Spread of the Gospel

Along with giving us more introduction to Paul, these verses also introduce us to the persecution that followed Stephen's death. As some believers are imprisoned, others flee Jerusalem, being scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. We do not know why, but the Apostles chose to remain in Jerusalem and somehow, by the will of God, escaped imprisonment. That's a story I'd love to hear. Why did they stay? How were they allowed to stay? I've heard it preached that the Apostles show a reluctance to embark on the mission to Samaria and the Gentiles and that's why the persecution was necessary. It's true they still don't get the implication of Jesus' command to go to the remotest part of the earth. They are going to need some help in understanding the full inclusion of Gentiles. But I don't think we can say that staying in Jerusalem is a sign of disobedience. I don't think we can say that because I don't see it clearly in the text. We are going to see Peter venturing out and traveling around, witnessing for Christ. But at this moment, I see more courage than reluctance. They are all known. Certainly, they are in more danger in Jerusalem than anyone else. Yet, they stay to continue on as witnesses for Jesus in Jerusalem and as leaders of the growing Church centered there.

Stephen is buried and devout men lament over him. Just as one Joseph and Nicodemus buried Jesus, these men publicly identify with Stephen even at risk of their own reputation and safety. This is one more instance where we see the comparison made between Stephen and his Lord. Stephen is like his Lord. And it takes us back to those dark days of uncertainty for Christ-followers in Jerusalem after the crucifixion.

I imagine many Christian Jews left Jerusalem at this time to return to their homes or to the homes of relatives. The Gospel spread out into different communities as regular, everyday believers continued

living life, but now in a new place outside of Jerusalem. Some of the believers who left Jerusalem went with a sense of calling. They left with ministry in mind, as evangelists and missionaries. And let me make a technical point of how I'm going to use the word, "missionary," through our series of Acts. I'm using, "missionary," to mean someone who is making disciples cross-culturally. And that's essential. You're not doing missions if you're sharing the Good News with somebody who is from your same culture. You're being an evangelist. Not all Christians are called to be missionaries, not in that sense. It doesn't mean all Christians have to go a long way off. If you live beside somebody who is from a different culture, you're engaging in work with people who are of a different culture, and you witness, you try to share the Gospel with them, then you're doing a work of missionary. The missionary does not necessarily have to cross geographic distance, but a missionary is always one who is crossing cultural distance.

Philip is an evangelist and a missionary. He is one of the embers launched out by the stamping feet of persecution. He does not go far geographically – it's only 20 miles (30 kilometers) to the city of Samaria where he is but he has traveled some distance culturally. He has gone from Judea to Samaria. Samaritans do share cultural similarities with their Jewish cousins, but also significant differences in ethnicity, and language, and religion, and history. So, Philip lands in Samaria, a new place culturally. Will the Gospel message fizzle out among these unorthodox people who accept some of the Bible but twist it around to fit into their culture? Or will the Gospel message light a fire?

Acts 8:4-13 describes for us Philip's ministry to the Samaritans.

Philip's Fruitful Witness in Samaria (8:4-13)

⁴ Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. ⁵ Philip went down to the city of Samaria and *began* proclaiming Christ to them. ⁶ The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. ⁷ For *in the case of* many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out *of them* shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. ⁸ So there was much rejoicing in that city. ⁹ Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; ¹⁰ and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, "This man is what is called the Great Power of God." ¹¹ And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. ¹² But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike. ¹³ Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.

The Ember and the Soil

Philip goes down to Samaria. Don't let that directional language confuse you. You may tend to think of down as south on a map and up as north. In Acts, whenever you leave Jerusalem, you are going down. Jerusalem is considered the center, and Jerusalem is located in a high mountain range. So you always go down from Jerusalem and up to Jerusalem.

Philip was one of the seven men chosen, along with Stephen, to assist with the distribution of funds to the Greek-speaking Jewish widows in Jerusalem back in chapter six. He was considered a man full of the Spirit and wisdom. Also, like Stephen and the Apostles, Philip was gifted by God to perform miraculous signs, casting out demons and healing the sick. Luke specifically mentions healing of the lame, which reminds us of the miracle performed by Peter in chapter 3.

Philip's location is referred to as "the city of Samaria." F. F. Bruce remarks that the most immediate assumption would be that Luke is referring to the city, Samaria, rebuilt by Herod the Great and called Sebaste. But that city was a Hellenistic city whereas the ministry of Philip emphasizes work among true Samaritans. So, Bruce thinks the city of Samaria referred to here is a town near Shechem in the region where Jesus had witnessed to the woman at the well.

The ethnic divide between Jews and Samaritans began a long time before this, with the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC. The conquering Assyrians deported much of the Jewish population and imported other conquered peoples. They intermarried, creating an ethnically diverse people related to the Jews. About 200 years later, when Ezra and Nehemiah returned to rebuild Jerusalem after the Southern Kingdom's exile to Babylon, the Samaritan population was not allowed to share in the rebuilding of the Temple. Still holding to their own interpretation of the books of Moses, the Samaritans built their own temple on their own mountain, Mount Gerizim. Which is why the Samaritan woman at the well said to Jesus in John 4:20, "Our fathers worshiped in this mountain [She is referring to Mount Gerizim.], and you *people* say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship."

Around 128 BC, when the Jewish leaders, the Maccabees, revolted against foreign domination and gained control of Palestine, they destroyed the Samaritan temple on Gerizim. They considered the Samaritan temple to be a heretical parody of the Temple in Jerusalem. So we can understand that there is real animosity between Jews and Samaritans. It's the animosity that serves for the basis for Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. You know, Jews despise Samaritans. Samaritans hate Jews. Why would a Samaritan help a Jew? Jesus rejected that ethnic divide. He rejected it theoretically through this parable by defining the Samaritan as the good neighbor. You know, who is my neighbor? The Samaritan. And then he went further, rejecting the divide with his own actions when he chose to travel through Samaria and invited a Samaritan woman, and then her whole village to receive salvation through belief in him. Jesus had already set the foundation.

Now, after the death of Jesus, Philip comes back to the region where Jesus saw a ripe harvest field. But would these Samaritans accept Philip's message? Would the harvest field still be ripe for Phillip? There are some cultural bridges to work from. There is a shared recognition of the books of Moses. There is a shared expectation of a Jewish Messiah. There is a shared opposition against the hierarchy in Jerusalem so that the violence of the Jewish leaders against the Christians kind of put them in the same camp with the Samaritans. But there is also a significant religious divide, an ethnic divide, a historical divide that has been developed in a spirit of distrust. So, the potential cultural bridges that exist between Samaritans and Jews - you know, why you'd the Gospel might be able to go to Samaria - it doesn't guarantee a way across a divide that's been widened by centuries of animosity.

But when you add up all the human reasons people might receive the gospel and all the reasons people might reject the gospel, you just can't know what the Holy Spirit is going to do until the Holy Spirit does it. In this mission to Samaria, God acts powerfully. The ember kicked out from Jerusalem catches the soil on fire. Samaritans wake up from the darkness and see Jesus.

The Power Struggle

Now, in the case of Israel, the miraculous signs of Jesus were prophesied ahead of time and work to affirm that was who he claimed to be. Isaiah has said the Messiah would heal the lame and restore sight to the blind. Jesus healed the lame and restored sight to the blind. The signs affirmed his claims as Messiah. God continued to empower the Apostles and other members of the early Church, like Stephen and Philip, to do similar miracles as Jesus did in order to affirm the message they proclaimed about Jesus. In Samaria, the power of the miracles also worked against the spiritual powers recognized by the Samaritans in their unorthodox worship.

Simon was doing some kind of power and now the people have a real reason to look away from Simon to something new, because there is another power at play. A power struggle ensues similar to the power struggle between Moses and the magicians of Egypt. Simon is recognized as being great in the use of magical arts. He has astonished crowds of people. He claimed to be someone great. We do not know the specifics of his spiritual claims but the people connect his magical powers with their belief in God. They have mixed together first-century spiritualism with the books of Moses. And they call Simon, "The Great Power of God." He is an impostor who has himself endorsed this false belief that his power comes from God.

And we do not see a direct power encounter like with Moses and the Egyptian magicians, where they'd both do a series of miracles. We see two choices. There is the power of Simon's magic and then there's the power of Philip's miracles. The power of the Holy Spirit working through Philip proves more convincing to the Samaritans, leading many to believe in the message preached by Philip. And as they place their faith in Jesus Christ, Philip baptizes them. Even Simon the magician believes and is baptized. The text says he is amazed by the miracles Philip performs, which implies to me that he has no idea how to do what Philip does.

What others have sensed Simon knows to be true. His magic is nowhere near the same thing as Philip's miracles. Simon's wonder at the miracles Philip performs suggests to me that his magic was not true spiritual power, but tricks he performed to pretend to be someone great. And he seemed to be very good at it, good enough to know true power when he sees it. And so, Simon believes. Another life is changed. But changed how much? We will have some questions in a minute about Simon when Peter comes. But Phillip was willing to include Simon based on his own testimony of faith.

Philip's baptism of the Samaritans expresses his full acceptance of their new birth in Christ. Philip believes that Samaritans are genuinely believing. That's the implication of his baptizing them. He wouldn't baptize them if he didn't believe there was true belief going on. The full implication is not yet clear to leaders in Jerusalem. What does this mean for the Gospel going out and what does this mean for the requirements of the Old Covenant? This is more of a half-step towards the Gentiles, not a full step. The Samaritans have Jewish blood. The Samaritans practice the Laws of Moses even if they have temple worship confused. The Samaritans are going to be eating kosher, so that's not even going to be brought into question is this okay or is this not okay. Samaritans had come to faith through Jesus. We know Jesus approves. Samaritans speak a similar language and have a shared history. So, we may be a little surprised as Jewish Christians by the inclusion of Samaritans as true members of the New Covenant people of God. But we are not too surprised. We can fit this into our theological worldview.

Still, the Apostles want to see for themselves this awakening of Samaritans. So, Peter and John make the trip down from Jerusalem. And Peter affirms, as an Apostle, the work that God is doing. That affirmation of the work in Samaria is recorded in Acts 8:14-24.

Peter's Affirmation of God's Work in Samaria (8:14-24)

¹⁴ Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, ¹⁵ who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶ For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then they *began* laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹ saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." ²⁰ But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! ²¹ "You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. ²² "Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³ "For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity." ²⁴ But Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

Receiving the Word of God

We use different words and phrases when referring to the moment of new birth when a person believes. We might say, "she placed her faith in Jesus," or, "he believed," or, "he received Jesus." Here Luke says, "Samaria had received the word of God." That is the phrase he uses. And that was the phrase he used when writing about Pentecost, "those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls (Acts 2:41)." He uses the same phrase

referring later to Cornelius household, “Gentiles received the word... (Acts 11:1).” The Bereans also will “receive the word with great eagerness (Acts 17:11).” In this sense, receiving the word about Jesus is the same as receiving Jesus or believing in Jesus. Truth faith requires an assent to truth content. There is a message being delivered that we believe.

Luke’s use of the phrase at Pentecost, here referring to Samaritans and in Acts 11 referring to Gentiles seems intentional. He is using the same phrase each time on purpose. The Gospel spreads to individuals. Individuals must believe in Jesus and receive forgiveness for their specific sins and experience new life in Christ. When we say that the Gospel spreads to a group, we mean that individuals in that group have come to faith. But we can then say it spreads to groups. We just recognized what we mean by that. The Jews at Pentecost received the Word. The emphasis there in Acts 2 was more clearly individual but it also applied to the group. The Jews of Jerusalem received the Word of truth about Jesus. That does not mean all the Jews of Jerusalem. It’s not the whole group, but it means a group of Jews in Jerusalem. Luke’s comment, “Samaria had received the word of God”, emphasizes the group. He doesn’t say that Samaritans received the Word of God but Samaria, the place, received the Word of God. And this is a significant step forward in the spread of the Gospel. We move from Jews in Judea now to individual Samaritans in Samaria. A significant number of individual Samaritans had acknowledged the truth of the Gospel, so that we can say, Samaria, the place, the people, have received the Word. It does not mean all Samaritans. We know that. It means the Gospel has crossed a significant cultural bridge. The same language will be used when the members of Cornelius’ household believe to emphasize the crossing of another cultural bridge to reach Gentiles. The Gentiles will receive the Word.

In all three examples, the reception of the Gospel succeeds against human explanation. We just wouldn’t expect it. The Jerusalem Jews at Pentecost are accused by Peter of murdering the Messiah. That’s part of his message. And yet, instead of stoning Peter, they receive the Word and repent, 3000 of them. The Samaritans are told a Jewish Messiah has come. The Jews are right in their worship of Yahweh. The Samaritans receive the Word of God even though it affirms the Jews, not themselves, to truly be God’s Old Covenant people. Then this Roman centurion is told that this inconsequential people on the edge of the Roman empire happen to be God’s chosen ones and that the true King of creation comes from them, but he was crucified like a criminal on a Roman cross. Humanly speaking, it is almost inconceivable that a Roman military officer would accept such a message. And yet, he and his household receive that word as true. You never really know what the Holy Spirit is going to do, until the Holy Spirit does it. So, receiving the Word of God as Luke has used it means, yielding of your own worldview to the Gospel, and accepting of what Scripture says about who God truly is, who Jesus truly is, and who you truly are.

Receiving the Holy Spirit

Samaritans received the Word of God. Peter and John came to see for themselves. And they found something curious. The Samaritans had believed and had been baptized by Philip but had not yet received the Holy Spirit. The prophecy of Joel about the pouring out of the Holy Spirit was directed to Jews. So maybe the Samaritans aren’t supposed to receive the Holy Spirit? But that doesn’t seem to be the assumption here. Peter and John seemed to have no problem believing that the prophecy applied to the Samaritans, as well. And maybe because of their shared Jewish heritage, I don’t know, but Peter and John pray for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit. Luke writes,

¹⁶ For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then they *began* laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.

The order here seems similar to what we saw at Pentecost. The group of 70 praying in the upper room had all believed in Jesus as Messiah. And yet, they had to wait for some time after belief before the Holy Spirit was poured out on them as believers. These Samaritans have also already believed. Philip affirmed their profession of faith by baptizing them. And then later, after Peter and John had

come, they receive the Holy Spirit. The text does not say specifically that they spoke in tongues when they received the Holy Spirit. But it would make sense for the Apostles to expect the receiving of the Holy Spirit in Samaria to be the same as the outpouring they received at Pentecost. Also, Simon's recognition that the laying on of hands brings about the reception of the Holy Spirit suggests that there was some kind of spiritual manifestation associated with the receiving of the Holy Spirit. Simon would not have likely have been impressed by Peter laying his hands on a Samaritan believer and then simply declaring him filled with the Holy Spirit by faith, without there being any kind of sign. Speaking in tongues, like at Pentecost, is the best option for a kind of visible manifestation of the Spirit that would have affirmed to the Apostles that the Samaritans had indeed received the Spirit and would have impressed Simon that something powerful had just happened. So even though the text doesn't say they spoke in tongues when they received the Spirit, I think it's quite valid to assume that they did.

Now we have again that challenging question of Biblical narrative. How much of this is a description of a special occurrence that occurred at a particular time and place, and how much of it is prescriptive for us? What about this experience should we understand as normative to our own Christian experience? Does the receiving of the Holy Spirit normally come after a person believes, like at Pentecost? Like with these Samaritans? Should we always expect speaking in tongues to accompany the receiving of the Holy Spirit, like at Pentecost and like, probably, here in Samaria? What about laying on of hands by the Apostles? Is that necessary for the receiving of the Holy Spirit? We are still not ready to answer those questions, not ready to interpret what about the experience of receiving the Holy Spirit was descriptive and what was prescriptive. And we're not ready because we have one more significant example we need to get to, so that we can do a good job of considering this question in the broader context of Acts. And that example is going to be in chapter 11, with the conversion of Cornelius and his household, and their reception of the Holy Spirit. So when we get there we'll address these questions.

Christian power - relational, not magical

What I would like to discuss now with this passage is Simon's response to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, as a representative of the unorthodox spirituality in Samaria. And in our day Simon is probably a pretty good mix of, kind of, our secular culture that's influenced by Christianity, but it's influenced by a lot of other spiritual views, and it kind of comes up with this mixed up worldview of what spirituality truly is. Simon views the spiritual power of the Apostles as real magic. They have discovered the secret to harnessing spiritual power. Simon wants to harness spiritual power. He offers to pay for the secret.

And that offer is offensive for multiple reasons. First, he interprets the Holy Spirit as a power source that human beings can manipulate. This is such a wrong, and yet normal view of Christianity, normal view of religion, that we do religion in order to manipulate God to get him on our side or to get him to bless our lives. So, not only is this a wrong view that is really common in society, it's a danger for all Christians. We are tempted to think our prayers, our faith, our religious intensity, our good behavior, you know, some mix of that is a formula that can cause the Spirit to act according to our desires. But no matter how much we pray, or how sincere we are in our prayer, or how intensely we cry out, or how good we are in our praise, the Spirit is living God. He is not manipulated. He acts according to his will in harmony with the will of the Father and the Son. The right way to relate to God and in relationship to the Holy Spirit is relational. We make request to God as sons and daughters, not manipulating him but trusting him to act with a "yes" or a "no" or a "maybe." He is in charge. He is Father. There is no special formula of prayer, or ritual, or behavior to control God and the work of the Holy Spirit. If we think we've found it, we are going down the wrong road. So that's offensive. You don't manipulate the Spirit, Simon.

Second, Simon's offer offends by misinterpreting the motives of the Apostles as though money could move them to grant him this ability, even if they somehow could.

²⁰ But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! ²¹ You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. ²² Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you.

Simon understood religion as a source of spiritual power that could be useful for his life. And we can all be tempted to see Christianity as primarily about providing us the life we want according to our own terms. Often that is how people come to Christ. God reaches into our real world of need. And he provides for us. Just like he had been providing for people in Jerusalem. He provided for the widows. Maybe he protects you financially, or saves your marriage, or saves you from a bad relationship before marriage. Or maybe he gives you true friends or gets you on the right track with your studies or in your job. Maybe he helps you grow up. Maybe he somehow entered into the pressing need of your life and granted you favor. And that favor may have caused you to turn, in true faith, to Jesus. But we also easily internalize the wrong message that religion is primarily about fixing all the problems in our life. Because that’s what happened. I was in trouble. God came and saved me. So, that’s what this Christianity is about. It’s about getting my life together. I get to on side with God and God fixes things. Instead of understanding Christian religion as it truly is, which is primarily about coming into right relationship with God, worshiping him, and through that relationship becoming the person that God has created you to be, that you might truly reflect his image. We actually need ongoing problems in our life to help form our character, to help us focus on God in faith, to help us to truly be Christ-like. God’s main plan is not to get our whole life together and smoothed out. God is much more about our relationship with him and who we are becoming.

Simon may have professed faith in Jesus Christ. But his character and his worldview are still very much defined by his culture and his old self. He spent very little time with Jesus yet. And he is tempted to regard the power of God as something he can harness for his life. And he can gain prestige or money if he can understand the right ritual or prayer or behavior that the Apostles are using to manipulate the Holy Spirit. He misunderstands relationship with God, and he misunderstand the character of the disciples. Which means he also has a very wrong understanding of Christian ministry.

He sees ministry for God as a way to regain the prestige and income he lost when he gave up the magic business to follow Jesus. It must have been a heady thing to be known as “the Great One of God.” He followed everyone else when a new amazing source of power showed up. But the old life still holds temptation. His old life was about spiritual power and recognition and money, and that’s still got a grip on him.

A year ago, I was at a conference, and a student asked me what I thought about Kanye West’s Sunday Service. I want to be careful because I believe that famous people can come to know Jesus truly. But my response was, “That is a terrible position he is putting himself in. And for Christian leaders around him to encourage him is terribly irresponsible.” I believe in changed lives. And I believe that changed lives happen in a moment. I also believe that character changes over time. Power, wealth, and influence exert significant control over human beings. And we see this over and over when famous people come to faith in Christ and then Christians want to use their witness, and we put them up in positions of leadership before they’ve had any chance to develop. Sports stars, musicians, and actors, they might have been truly changed by Jesus, but now we are expecting them to model Christ-like character and to speak from a Biblical worldview without giving them any time to develop that character, and they are in a very, very difficult place to develop character, being in the limelight of power, and influence, and money. It’s a terribly difficult situation they are being thrust into. If Kanye West’s life has been changed by Jesus, the absolute last thing he needs to be doing is jumping into leading a Christian worship spectacle. And just for his own sake, he needs to stop, but also for the sake of people he’s influencing and that he is eventually going to hurt because he does not have the character of Christ yet. He is not ready for this.

Simon's desires are very much defined by who he was. Peter sees it, saying to him, "Repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity."

What bitterness does Peter see in Simon? I assume he sees the bitterness of loss combined with the bitterness of jealousy. Simon had recognition and honor in his former life when he passed off his magic as real spiritual power. He gave that up when he placed his faith in Jesus.

I should pause and ask a question that you might have. We might wonder, "Did he truly believe in Jesus?" The story implies he did. He was baptized. In our study of John, however, we saw examples of people claiming to have believed and to being to walk with Jesus, and yet they were believing in their own version of the Messiah, and they didn't really have saving faith in Jesus. So, it's 100% just because the text says he believed. We don't know what he believed. It seems to me to imply that he had true belief, but I am okay with leaving the question open here. I am not sure it is essential to the story. This is part of the story when you're doing ministry and people are professing faith in Christ, it's not clear yet who has truly believed and who has not truly believed, and you find out over time. And sometimes the ones who fall quickly actually will get back up and walk. They were true believers who fell. Others seem to carry on for a while, but it never really catches, and it takes some time to find out they never really believed.

What is essential is that Simon has made a profession of faith and he has even been baptized. He has identified himself with the name, Jesus. Falling into bitterness and bondage is possible for those who do not truly believe and possible for those who truly believe. So, it's a warning to all of us. We are excited about the newness of our relationship with God, about the offer of forgiveness, and love, and acceptance. We get excited by the story that makes sense and gives us purpose. But our minds are not immediately renewed. And our flesh is not immediately purified. We come to Christ with all kinds of wrong understanding. We come still broken, not yet fully healed. We bring our old habits and values and temptations into our new relationship with Jesus. And we may be freed from some old habits immediately. There is no longer any draw for us. Other desires might never fully go away. Either way, we need a lot of growth of character just to start becoming like Jesus. And that takes time.

Simon might have initially lost the desire to become someone great. He gave it all up for Jesus, and when it was just Phillip, and everything was going on. But then Peter and John show up. And not only can they perform miracles like Philip did, but they can confer power to other people. They lay their hands on Samaritans, and Samaritans manifest tongues, or gifts, or whatever it was that displayed the Holy Spirit power. As Simon watches the Apostles' ministry, he discovers that the desire for power and recognition has not gone away after all. He becomes jealous of Philip and Peter and John. He wants what they have. But he cannot get it. So, he becomes bitter. He gets to the point where he is even willing to make an offer to pay for the ability to do the ministry the Apostles are doing.

Peter describes this desire for a ministry that God has not granted as bondage. Simon wants the gifts and the ministry role he sees in the leaders. He had been a leader. He had been an influencer. Why should he not be allowed to step into the top of Christians ministry here in Samaria? In his jealousy, he does not likely give thought to the long process that brought Peter and John to where they are now. You know, their whole journey with Jesus over years is what made them fit for the ministry they were performing. That journey, and the specific calling of God, and the specific gifting of God.

Simon is fueled by old desires that are transferred into this new community. He cannot appreciate his own place in the community. He wants what he is in no shape to receive. And his desire has him in bondage to bitterness.

That's an experience, at some level, we can identify with. Who have you wanted to be? What have you wanted to do? What have you wanted to do for God? When you stopped trusting God to provide you with that opportunity, what means did you use in your own flesh to try and obtain that which you were not given by God? And when you were not able to obtain it, when did you become bitter,

or jealous, or upset with God, or did you just give up? Or when did you become upset with the people God chose instead of you?

It is a hard thing to want to be who we are not and yet trust God with who we are.

Peter tells Simon to pray that God would forgive him the intention of his heart. I am not sure what to make of Simon's response. He answered, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

I think God wanted repentance directly from Simon. He wanted to hear from Simon. And yet, sometimes when we are caught up in the temptation of our old way of seeing and doing, the most we can bring ourselves to do is ask for help. If Simon had heard the story of Ananias and Saphira, his request for prayer from Peter might take on a more urgent tone. He had set himself forward as a Samaritan example of hypocritical leadership. He is in danger. He wanted to buy influence and give direction to the new Christian movement out of a hypocritical heart. Fear of God expressed in a request for prayer from Peter might be exactly the right way to respond.

Simon becomes a warning to us, and let's end with this. We come to Christ with a lot of baggage. We might get caught up in the immediate excitement of new birth and all the change that happens right away, such that we do not recognize how much growth still lies ahead. Simon is a warning to trust God with our formation, and with the ministry, and opportunities he has for us. Simon is also a warning to give others time to grow without hurrying them into ministry positions beyond their capabilities, paying attention not so much to young leaders; to their talents, or their social ability, or their influence, but paying a lot more attention to the Christ-likeness of their character.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 8:1-13. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. What motivates the spread of the gospel out from Jerusalem? Is that surprising to you?
3. What kind of man does Philip seem to be? Consider also Acts 6:1-8.
4. How is the ministry of Philip in Samaria similar or different from the ministry of Peter and the Apostles in Jerusalem? Consider both what Philip does and what happens among the Samaritans.
5. Read Acts 8:14-24. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
6. Why do you think Peter was sent?
7. What difference exists now that Peter has arrived?
8. How would you explain that difference?
9. How do you understand Simon? What was the status of his belief? What did he want and what motivated him? Why did Peter respond as he did?