

## Receiving the Gifts of God

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Acts: The Spirit Moving / Acts 8:14-25 / July 20, 2025

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### Introduction:

Today, we continue in the story of the gospel spreading to Samaria in Acts 8. If you missed last week, Adam unpacked verses 4-13 which show how the gospel moved beyond Jerusalem through persecution following Stephen's death. We saw God used Philip, one of the seven tasked with caring for the daily distribution for widows, to preach the truth of Christ in a city of Samaria. And astonishingly, despite the hostility between the Jews and Samaritans, they paid attention to Philip, believed in the gospel, and were baptized. Luke also focused on a magician or sorcerer named Simon who believed he was great and had won over the Samaritans with his perceived power. Yet even he was amazed by the signs and miracles performed by Philip and verse 13 says, "even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip." Our passage continues this story with some twists that offer significant insights into the Spirit's movement. I want to draw out four things we see in this story before concluding with what it teaches us about receiving the gifts of God in the gospel. First, in verses 14-17, we see,

### A Delayed Reception of the Spirit

We need to carefully work through these verses because of their interpretative challenges. Notice how Luke opens in verse 14, "Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John." Pause there. Luke starts by taking us to the response of the believers in Jerusalem to the gospel penetrating Samaria, sending Peter and John to check things out. Note the phrase, "received the word of God." Luke commonly uses this phrase to indicate true faith, which requires us to consider two ways Scripture speaks of belief. One is simply believing the power of Jesus is authentic. The other is true saving faith. In John 2:23-24, John describes the first kind of belief, saying, "Now when [Jesus] was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people." There is a belief in Jesus that does not truly break into the heart. True saving faith always goes deeper. When Luke says the Samaritans "received the word of God," he is confirming they had true saving faith, and the apostles going to confirm reports of their conversion. Before we continue, let's remember what Peter promised to the first gospel recipients. Look back at Acts 2:38, "Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'" Peter promised repentance and baptism secured the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Now, follow the flow of verses 14-17 in chapter 8, "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." The sequence of events in this story causes a significant question in light of Peter's promise. The Samaritans believed and were baptized in verse 12, word of their conversion came to the apostles in verse 14, but verse 16 says the Spirit "had not yet fallen on any of them." The Spirit isn't given until Peter and John pray for them to receive Him and, in verse 17, the reception of the Spirit is linked to the laying on of the apostles' hands. Varied theological perspectives propose different reasons for this. Catholics say this proves a distinction between baptism and confirmation. Most Pentecostals suggests it proves a distinction between receiving salvation and receiving the Spirit. Others believe the Samaritans weren't truly saved before the apostles came. So, what is taking place? The main question is whether Luke intends this to communicate a normative practice. In other words, is this showing the normal pattern of God in salvation? Or a unique action for a specific purpose? I believe we can rule out this being a normal pattern because Luke records different sequences of events throughout Acts. Acts 2:38-47 show thousands responding in saving faith, being baptized, and living under the clear influence of the Spirit. Yet, there is no mention of the practice of laying on of hands or even the apostles praying for them to receive the Spirit.

In Acts 9:17-18, the Spirit comes to Paul apart from any apostles present and before he is baptized. Likewise, in Acts 10:44-48, belief and the Spirit precede baptism without the laying on of hands. Finally, immediately following this story, an Ethiopian Eunuch is saved and baptized, with no mention of the apostles confirming his salvation or praying for the Spirit. The variations of patterns suggest there is no prescribed pattern. Rather, God gives the Spirit in a variety of ways to serve specific purposes. What is the purpose in our story? God chose to withhold the Spirit until Peter and John came to confirm their salvation. Richard Longenecker says it well, "In this first advance of the gospel outside the confines of Jerusalem, God worked in ways that were conducive not only to the reception of the Good News in Samaria but also to the acceptance of these new converts by believers at Jerusalem." (Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, Volume 9: John and Acts, p. 359). Why is this important to understand? First, it keeps us from assuming there are mechanisms we can employ to manipulate the Spirit of God. In the pride of our flesh, we often desire the ability to bring about certain grace from God, and we must understand there is nothing that forces the Spirit to work. Scripture consistently reveals God acts as He sees fit, for our good and His glory. Second, as God's kingdom expands beyond Jerusalem, this shows Hebraic Jews, Hellenistic Jews, and the Samaritans all receive the same Spirit and grace of God, joining them together as one new covenant people in Christ. As this delayed reception repeats when salvation extends to the Gentiles in Acts 11, their inclusion as well shows there is no distinction between God's people. Family, all are one in Christ and recipients of the same new covenant promises, marked by the gift of the Holy Spirit. To sum this up, this story is not describing a normative pattern of how the Spirit is received but a unique action to confirm the new covenant promises have extended to the Samaritans. Let's move to the next thing we see in verses 18-19,

### **A Foolish Desire for Power**

The narrative intentionally shifts again with the word "Now," back to Simon. Look at verses 18-19, "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.'" Three things should be noted in Luke's details. First, Luke indicates Simon believed the Spirit was given through the laying on of hands, not that this is how the Spirit is always given. Second, Simon longed for the power to give the Spirit, not the Spirit Himself. Third, Simon believed this power was the apostles to give and his money could persuade them to do so. All of this tells us Simon's belief was likely not saving faith. He believed in the power that amazed him but simply desired a connection to it. His belief lacked a true understanding of his need for the Spirit and God's sovereignty in giving the Spirit. This foolish desire for power speaks a warning to our hearts, which we will reflect on later. Before we do so, consider the third thing we see in verses 20-23,

### **A Pointed Call for Repentance**

The contrast Luke sets up is pointed and powerful. Look at verses 20-23, "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. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, 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.'" Luke contrasts Simon's lust for power with a detailed rebuke of his heart. Like the Beatles' famous line, "money can't buy me love," money can't buy the gift of God. Note the focus on Simon's heart. In verse 21, Peter says, "your heart is not right before God." Then, calls Simon to pray "the intent of your heart may be forgiven you" in verse 22, before describing the state of his heart in verse 23 as "being in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." Simon's heart was still filled with wretchedness, and he was a prisoner of sin, so Peter calls him to repent and seek true forgiveness. Church, true saving faith is a matter of the heart. It sees the depths of our sinful hearts and need for forgiveness. As Paul says in Romans 10:9-10, "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved."

And true confession involves a confession of sin. 1 John 1:8-10 says, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” There is no saving faith without confession of sin and heartfelt belief. This brings me to the final thing we see in verses 24-25,

### **A Thought-Provoking Conclusion**

Luke’s ending to this story is both sobering and invigorating. Look at verses 24-25, “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.” The sobering part is how Simon doesn’t appear to show true repentance or faith. His trust isn’t in Christ’s blood, but the apostles’ piety. He doesn’t pray to the Lord as commanded but asks them to pray. Early church fathers describe someone who sounds like Simon as the father of a heresy called Gnosticism. We don’t know what happened to Simon, but this possibility reminds us of a haunting truth. Satan is crafty and disguises his work. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 11:14-15, “Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness.” In Matthew 7:21-23, Jesus says many will claim to have followed him, even doing things in His name, but He will say He never knew them. Church, a tree is shown by its fruit. Don’t follow people who simply claim Christ with their words. Look for their hearts to show true evidence of the Spirit. The invigorating part of this ending is the apostles’ care for the Samaritans. In Luke 9:51-56, John wanted to call down fire to consume a village of the Samaritans. But now, he is ministering to these converts and helping save people from many villages of the Samaritans on return to Jerusalem. Prejudice was broken. Hatred was quelled. The love of Christ was shining. This should challenge our own prejudices. What is Luke’s primary purpose in this story? I believe it primarily serves to show how to truly receive the God’s gifts of forgiveness and the Spirit by examining Simon’s errors. Consider four truths from Simon’s errors. First,

#### **1) Seek the Giver not the Gifts**

Simon desired the power to give the Spirit, not the Spirit Himself. His final request was to escape torment, but his inability to pray to the Lord Himself speaks volumes. Simon’s heart ultimately wanted the power of the Lord, not the presence of the Lord. We face similar temptations to want the gifts God provides but not the giver Himself. Perhaps we desire things like healing, financial provision, community, escape from torment, peace, or comfort. But do we want the Lord? Family, the gifts of God are intrinsically tied to the giver. God says He is the fountain of living water. Jesus says come to Him to satisfy your hunger and thirst. As you respond to the gospel, ensure your heart desires God as the ultimate good in the gospel. Second,

#### **2) Set Aside Selfish Ambition**

Sadly, many respond to grace with desires for self-promotion. The term “simony” was created to relate this desire to Simon’s attempt to buy power and authority with money. Consider this piercing challenge by Kent Hughes, “We would be wrong to suppose this does not apply to us simply because we have not offered money for spiritual power. Simon tried to obtain spiritual power in order to promote himself, and anytime we seek spiritual power or abilities to put ourselves forward we make the same error. Preaching to gain recognition or status is simony. Serving with an eye to advancement in the church’s power structure is simony. Seeking spiritual gifts for the promotion of oneself is simony. Even seeking to be godly so others will think we are godly is a type of simony” (Kent R. Hughes, Acts: The Church Afire, p. 114). Family, if our hearts seek personal gain through our wealth or any act of righteousness, we need to repent and fall on the grace of God. Third,

#### **3) Realize You Have Nothing to Bring**

Simon assumed he could buy the power of God, but God’s grace is always unmerited. Do we think we have anything to give to earn God’s blessing? Does our service come with strings attached? Do we give in order to gain something in return?

Sadly, many have been encouraged to give to God in a variety of ways with a promise of increased wealth or status. We must take great care with our hearts. If our goal is personal gain, we are not giving with motives God will honor. Going deeper with this heart inquiry, do we think we contribute anything for our salvation? Salvation is provided by faith alone, through grace alone, in Christ alone, for the glory of God alone. It comes only from trusting in God's grace in Christ, and we bring nothing to the table. One of my favorite hymns, Rock of Ages, captures this well, saying in verses 2 and 3, "Not the labors of my hands can fulfill thy law's demands; could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow, all for sin could not atone; thou must save, and thou alone. Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling; naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to thee for grace; foul, I to the fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die" (Augustus Toplady, Rock of Ages). Family, know that you have nothing to bring to God. All you have and will receive is given according to the riches of His grace in Christ, to the praise of His glory and grace. Finally,

#### **4) Approach Christ Through His Grace**

Simon's final response indicates he misunderstood the gospel. Peter called him to pray to the Lord, but Simon asked Peter to pray to the Lord. There is one mediator between God and man, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Family, Christ tore the veil and provides direct access to God through Him. This doesn't mean we shouldn't ask for others to pray for us, but we entreat their prayers in conjunction with ours. I was once offered money to pray for people based on an assumption that my prayers as a pastor were needed. My heart broke at this, and I swiftly declined the money before praying for them and encouraged them to trust in the sufficiency of Christ for all they need. We rely on Christ as our mediator, not any man. We have a team of people to pray with others each week and a prayer guide throughout the week, not because Christ is insufficient but, because God joins our hearts together through prayer and chooses to work through them to delight us with answered prayer. Yet, we only need Christ to intercede for us, and He is always interceding for us.

#### **Conclusion:**

As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of reflection and response, consider how you should respond to God's Word today. Learn how not to respond from Simon, and how to respond from Philip and the Samaritans. For those who have yet to trust in Christ for salvation, run to Him through His grace. For all of us, ensure you are seeking the giver over the gift, have set aside selfish ambition, and recognize you have nothing to bring. Then, approach Christ through His grace. Ask Him what you should believe, desire, or do and walk forward trusting Him to do a good work in you. As always, you are welcome to come and kneel before Him in a posture of humility or find a member of our prayer team to pray with you and for you. Respond as the Spirit leads. Would you pray with me as we respond?