

“The Actual Power of God that is Called Great”

Acts 8:9-25

When we last saw Philip he was recently scattered from Jerusalem by persecution against Christians and now in a city in Samaria where he was preaching and working miracles. That is Philip’s story, but we are looking at a much larger story here. This is the story of the original church, and already in its young history much has happened. Jesus has been crucified and resurrected and then appeared before many witnesses. Before he ascends to Heaven, Jesus tells the disciples to wait in Jerusalem to receive power from the Holy Spirit and then to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, which they do a bang-up job of with thousands and thousands coming to faith in Christ and so is born the original church. Of course, Jesus had also said to be his witnesses in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth, which they hadn’t done such a bang-up job of until persecution scattered them. So now we come back to Philip, recently arrived in Samaria and being a witness of Jesus.

Last week we saw the results of Philip’s preaching and miracles, but today we are going to take a bit of an aside and learn more about what was going on in Samaria when Philip arrived, and what was going on was a society that had been captivated by magic. When we think of magic, we probably think of sleight of hand; magic tricks as it were. Simon was probably a bit of a magician in that sense, but he was more than that. Simon was a sorcerer. Most of the time when we think of sorcerers, or wizards, we think of characters from fiction like Merlin, Harry Potter, or my favorite, Gandalf. Simon, however, was no fictional character. He likely combined elements of near-eastern mysticism, sleight of hand, and actual demonic, super-natural powers. It is important for us to understand the nature of his power and influence, as well as the culture around him, in order to truly learn the lessons our passage teaches us today.

Culturally, Samaritans believed in God and in fact, were even looking for the Messiah. If we look back in John 4:22-25 at Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well we see him telling her the Samaritans worship what they do not know. So, we have a people who believed in God and looked for the Messiah but did not have a strong anchor in the truth. They are “spiritual” and looking for things which will appear spiritual. Into this scene comes Simon, and he amazes the people. So that is the scene to which we have arrived. Now we can jump into our passage, but before we do, let’s pray.

[9] But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. [10] They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great." [11] And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. [12] But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. [13] Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed. [14] Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to 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 on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. [17] Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. [18] Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, [19] saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone 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 neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. [22] Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. [23] For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." [24] And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me." [25] 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. (Act 8:9-25 ESV)

It's easy to read this and think Simon is the main character of this story, but the actual main character, the actual power of God that is called Great, is present both behind the scenes and openly. That is who we need to see in this passage, the Holy Spirit at work through the Gospel in the growth of the Church. Let's jump in.

The influence of a spiritual peddler over spiritual dabblers. Vs 9-11

The first word in our passage creates kind of an odd starting place for us. The Greek word here interpreted "but" is a conjunction that is used to signify continued thought development from a previous idea, often as a way to emphasize a contrast. If we look back at verses 5-8, we see Philip preaching about Christ and performing miracles garnering the attention of the people. The introduction of Simon at this point with the conjunction "but" paints him as someone who stands in contrast to Philip. Simon had amazed the people for many years with what he had been able to do with his magic. As a result, they were all, from youngest to oldest,

giving him their attention, and he took advantage of that to proclaim that he was someone great. This is a strong word. Don't think of the loose way we use great such as, "that was a great steak" or "that was a great ballgame." This is a word that conveys the idea of someone eminent in power who should be highly esteemed. He had so enthralled the people that they said he was the personified power of God that is called Great. So, let's look at this contrast between verses 5-8 and 9-11. Philip performs miracles. Simon performs demonic powered super-natural acts. The people pay attention to Philip as a result of the miracles. The people pay attention to Simon because of his super-natural acts. Philip proclaims Jesus as God and the Messiah. Simon proclaims himself as great.

Do we not see this today? People hungering for spiritual things but having no ground in the truth. 1 Corinthians 2:14 tells us that apart from the Holy Spirit nobody is able to understand spiritual things. Is it any wonder that those who are chasing after the spiritual without the presence of the Holy Spirit at work in their lives are so easily led astray? Is it any wonder that we see things like this?



This is Lakewood "Church" where Joel Osteen preaches his false gospel to about 52,000 attendees every week. Look how full that place is. Why is it so full while so many churches are so empty? We have the truth; Joel Osteen does not. Joel Osteen is not the only one. People like Kenneth Copeland, T.D. Jakes, Joseph Prince, Creflo Dollar, Joyce Meyer, William Young, author of The Shack, and others trill a line that pulls people into something that is a semblance of

the gospel but not the truth. Some merely push a self-help dogma wrapped in a Jesus-excluding, christianesque spiritualism that is so enticing in our culture. The name Tony Robbins might ring a bell. Some dance closer to the true gospel than others, but they are all peddling a false gospel to people who are only dabbling in spiritual things. If they aren't pointing to their own greatness, they are pointing people to how great they can be, how you can have "Your Best Life Now." Magnifying God in Christ is the last thing on their minds. In the end, however, there is something missing, and it is the one thing we see on only one side of the comparison between Philip and Simon. It is the result that only comes from the true Gospel being proclaimed. The result of Philip's preaching, according to verse 8, is the people have joy. There is no true joy apart from the true Gospel. Simon could never have brought joy to the Samaritans he had enthralled, but he could establish his influence and take their money, and that's exactly what he had been doing.

The power of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel trumps everything else. Vs 12-13

Just as life was going great for Simon and he was raking in the dough, we come to another "but" at the beginning of verse 12. Something is about to change, and it all starts when Philip shows up . . . sort of. Philip had worked miracles, and now he is preaching good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. The Samaritans are hearing this message of the Gospel and they are believing and being baptized! Now we don't know what kind of preacher Philip was. He could have been dry and methodical. He could have been fiery and exciting. He may have been polished or rough. We don't know, and it doesn't matter because ultimately the power of the Gospel is not dependent on how well it is presented but on the power of the Holy Spirit working through it to change the hearts of those who hear it. So, it isn't so much that Philip showed up but that the Holy Spirit did, and he was regenerating their hearts and drawing them away from Simon and to God. **Point of application: Philip did not have the power to draw these people away from Simon, and we don't have the power to draw people away from the prince of this world. We are only responsible for obeying the command to share the Gospel, it is the Holy Spirit who brings the power to transform lives through it.**

Luke tells us that even Simon believed and was baptized. This raises the question of whether or not Simon was truly converted, but for the moment, I want us to act like Philip did

and assume he was. Evidently, Philip thought Simon was converted because he baptized him. Simon continued with Philip as well. Based on what Philip was seeing up to this point, Simon was a believer. I think there is something that we can learn from Philip here. **Point of application: Regardless of someone's background, they are not beyond the power of the Holy Spirit. If someone professes a proper understanding belief in Jesus Christ then we should accept that, baptize them, admit them to fellowship in the church, and disciple them. We cannot look on the heart as God can so we must ensure that the true Gospel is preached and accept a response to that as legitimate. In the end we must not assume that anyone is beyond the power of the Holy Spirit. That's something you shouldn't assume about yourself either. If you think you are beyond hope, beyond the reach of God, you are wrong. The Holy Spirit has the power to bring new life to anyone who calls on the name of Jesus.**

The presence of the Holy Spirit enables ministry and creates unity. Vs 14-17

These were Samaritans that were believing as a result of the Holy Spirit at work through Philip. In case you've forgotten, the Jews and the Samaritans didn't exactly get along. There was a long history of animosity between the two groups so one might expect a division to remain between the Jerusalem church and the new believers in Samaria. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard about what was happening in Samaria, they decided to send Peter and John to them. Once again, it's easy to look at Peter and John as the main characters in this part of the story, but their role, while important, means nothing without the work of the Holy Spirit. When Peter and John get there, the first thing they do is pray that the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit. They do not lay hands on them until after praying. I think this is extremely instructive for us. **Point of application: Anything we attempt in ministry must begin with prayer. The prayer of Peter and John indicated that this was something beyond them; this was a work of God. We are no different. Anything that we do in ministry is powerless apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. Whether that is teaching our NextGen Kids, witnessing to our circles, or planting a new church, everything must start with and continue on in prayer.**

Now we must ask, why hadn't the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit. Verse 16 tells us that the Holy Spirit had not fallen on any of them. Why? What does that mean? We know that it is a work of the Holy Spirit to regenerate the heart to belief. We also know that believers are

indwelt by the Holy Spirit at the point of their conversion. Usually, there is no special outward manifestation of this. The only times in Acts we see a special outward manifestation of the Holy Spirit is when a group is first coming into the church. The way I think about it, the first time this happened was with the disciples at Pentecost, and it showed them that the words of Jesus were coming to pass in the creation of the new church. It also fulfilled the prophecy in Joel. We also see such a special manifestation with the new believers in Ephesus as recorded in Acts 19. I think the most helpful thing in understanding this is the occasion in Acts 10 of the Holy Spirit falling on the Gentiles and the subsequent response of the Jerusalem church in Acts 11:18 which says that when those in Jerusalem heard from Peter that the Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit in the same manner they had that “they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.’” So, when Peter and John laid their hands on the Samaritans, they too received the Holy Spirit with some sort of manifestation that Simon was able to see based on his response. There were many potential spots for division in the early church, but the coming of the Holy Spirit in the same way to these new believers erased those divisions and brought unity. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:13, “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” **Point of application: So that’s the point for us; we must live in unity. The unity of believers glorifies God and points others to belief in him because it is only possible through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.**

The purpose of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is to glorify God. Vs 18-19

You may notice that in verse 17, it says “they received the Holy Spirit.” Simon is never included in the “they” that refers to the Samaritans. He is always addressed separately; they believed and were baptized; Simon believed and was baptized. So, we see them receiving the Holy Spirit but not Simon. This tells us something about Simon’s belief. If we look back at verse 13, we see that Simon believed and was baptized. As to why he believed, we don’t know for certain. He could have been caught up in the emotion of everyone else. How often have we seen someone try to stir up emotions to get people to make a decision to follow Christ? That is a dangerous game to play with someone’s eternal state. Or perhaps he believed in the power displayed in the miracles of Philip and even the death and resurrection of Jesus but never acknowledged his own sinfulness. We can’t say for sure why Simon professed belief, but we can

look at his interaction with Peter. He also continued with Philip and was continually amazed by the miracles that Philip performed. Some might say that his continuing with Philip is an indication of his belief, but didn't Judas continue with Jesus and Demas continue with Paul? Also, Simon himself had performed super-natural acts that had amazed the people. Now Philip is doing things beyond what Simon did. The people have turned their focus to Philip, and he has pointed them to Jesus. Essentially, Simon has been supplanted along with his livelihood! I think this, along with his amazement at Philip's miracles, is why Simon continued with Philip, to look for an opportunity to regain his position or something close to it and perhaps even learn how Philip did what he did. When Peter and John showed up, it would have seemed to Simon that they were higher on the spiritual hierarchy than Philip. Since they were able to lay hands on people and have them receive the Holy Spirit then if he were able to do the same, he would move beyond Philip. This was his ticket! Notice he did not request this power from Peter and John but demanded it and offered money for it. Of course, he would not have offered money for the ability to give the Holy Spirit if he did not stand to make money by it. All of this lets us see Simon's heart. It was a heart full of pride that sought not to glorify God but to glorify himself. He desired to lift himself up for the purpose of gaining influence, so the people would pay attention to him again, and then gaining their money. The Holy Spirit always works in our lives to glorify God. We can put together a scriptural picture of this. Ezekiel 36:27 says, "[I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.](#)" Further, 1 Peter 2:12 says when the lost see our good deeds it will result in God being glorified. Add to that Philippians 4:13, "[I can do all things through him who strengthens me.](#)" Put all that together and you have a picture of God giving the Holy Spirit to empower us to live the Christian life so that when others see it God will be glorified. So when Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:31, "[whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God,](#)" that is something that can only be done through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

The Holy Spirit brings true repentance. Vs 20-24

Of course, glorifying God was not what Simon was about, and it is the clearest indication to us that he had never truly repented. Peter sees this same thing and confronts him harshly. Essentially, verse 20 could be translated, "You along with your silver are both going to hell." The statement that Simon has neither part nor lot in this matter is basically using repetition to

emphasize that Simon's heart was not right before God and therefore he had nothing to do with receiving the Holy Spirit or being a part of the church. In Acts 2:38, Peter says, "Repent and be baptized." Notice he doesn't say believe and be baptized but repent and be baptized. I suppose there's a slight chance you might remember from my sermon eons ago on Mark 1:14-15 that I talked about the link in Jewish thought between repentance and belief. They are inseparably connected. Repentance comes from a change in the heart that leads to true belief. If there is no repentance, there is no belief as they both originate from the same thing. True repentance leading to true belief only comes from the Holy Spirit. Peter saw that this had not occurred in Simon, but even though harsh, he still showed him a way forward if Simon would truly repent and pray for forgiveness. This is a great example to us of the point of confronting sin in the church. It is first and foremost to maintain the purity of the church by seeking repentance and restoration or, only if that fails, removing them from fellowship. Even then we still must continue to reach out to them with the Gospel. This is the pattern Jesus teaches in Matthew 18. Unfortunately, Simon did not repent. He was concerned about the consequences of his rebellion against God, not wanting to perish along with his silver, but neither did he want to change. Instead, he tells Peter to pray for him that none of what Peter said would happen should occur. He truly was not converted, for even in the end he did not understand the spiritual truth that salvation only comes from repentance and belief in finished work of Jesus not from someone else's prayer for your deliverance. **Point of application: It is important that we keep a watchful eye to the purity of the church, but perhaps more important that we look for true repentance in ourselves. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 13:5, we should examine ourselves to see whether we are in the faith. Have you experienced true repentance? If not, it's not too late now. Remember, nobody is beyond the power of the Holy Spirit to bring new life. Will you repent and believe the Gospel? The time is now, and there is no greater choice before you. Jesus promises that whoever comes to him, he will by no means cast out.**

The normalcy of the work of the Holy Spirit. Vs 25

Now that all this drama has occurred, we are left with a simple statement in verse 25 that leaves us with an idea of the normalcy of it all. When Peter and John return to Jerusalem they continue doing what they have been doing ever since the beginning. They continue preaching the Gospel, but now it is being preached in all Judea and Samaria. Soon we will see that it

travels even to the end of the world. Indeed, it must still do so today as there are over 7,300 people groups around the world who are unreached with the Gospel. That's a population over 4.6 billion. This was a big event that had just occurred in Samaria, yet it seems to have just been an aside in the normal progression of the Gospel in the growth of the church. Peter and John went right back to what they had been doing before. This is the normal working of the Holy Spirit through the proclaiming of the Gospel to change hearts and bring people to faith in Jesus Christ. **Point of application: So, if this is the normal working of the Holy Spirit then we should not think it beyond us to do as Peter and John did. As we go through our lives, we must proclaim the Gospel to a world that is dying from the lack of hearing it. It is what we are commanded to do, what the lost need us to do, and the normal way the Holy Spirit works to grow the church. And if we look at the empty seats around us, I think we will see that we have plenty of room for growth.**