

Join us, if you can, in reading this with your family and praying at 10:15 on Sunday, May 17, 2020.

The Spirit's Work in Samaria

Dear First Southern Baptist Church family,

Last week we looked at the life and death of Stephen. We noted in Acts 8, that at Stephen's death the church scattered away from Jerusalem because of the persecution that arose against Jesus' disciples. Though Stephen's death was tragic, God can and does use the worst of our tragedies to expand his Kingdom and grow his church. On October 6, 1536, William Tyndale was burned at the stake. His crime was translating the Bible from the original Greek and Hebrew into contemporary English.

One night as a young college graduate and scholar, Tyndale, while debating with a priest who claimed that England would be better off without God's law than the Pope's, exclaimed, "If God spares my life, I will cause a boy that driveth the plow to know more of the Scriptures than you do." His life goal was to make the Bible accessible in English for all people. He was denied permission to embark on this effort through official channels, but spent his life producing a readable, English New Testament, and eventually Old Testament. He ended up on King Henry VIII's bad side for criticizing the annulment of one of his marriages, making Tyndale a public enemy and his Bible translation contraband that some called the testament not of Christ, but Tyndale's master the Antichrist. Though ordered to cease his publishing and translating, Tyndale continued to do so from mainland Europe, smuggling his Bibles into England. He was eventually betrayed, arrested, imprisoned, and condemned to death as a heretic. Tyndale's last reported words before strangulation and burning were, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes." It would appear that Tyndale's tragic death ended his efforts to make a plow boy more biblically literate than a priest; however, the very next year King Henry, for the sake of the growing Anglican church, authorized a Bible printed in English. This Bible, the Matthew Bible, was unbeknownst to the king, overwhelmingly the work of William Tyndale. Many estimate that anywhere from two-thirds to 90% of the eventual King James Bible is word-for-word the work of William Tyndale. This illustrates for us that even though circumstances may be grim and end in tragedy, God is more than capable of using the seeds of tragedy to grow gardens of grace.

As we look to Acts 8:4-25, we'll see that even though the death of Stephen and the persecution of the church scattered God's people, that scattering furthered the cause of the Kingdom and led to the conversion of many on the outskirts of Judaism and away from Jerusalem. All of this was a part of God's plan, according to his wisdom, to empower his disciples to be his witnesses to the uttermost ends of the earth. Look with me at Acts 8:4-25:

"4) Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. 5) Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. 6) And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. 7) For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. 8) So there was much joy in that city.

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."

We'll look at this passage in four parts. Verses 4-8 describe the setting and Philip's success in preaching to the Samaritans. In verses 9-13, we'll meet Simon the magician and see his magic contrasted and in conflict with the work of the Spirit. In verses 14-24, we'll see how the apostles join the work in Samaria, the arrival of the Holy Spirit, and their confrontation with Simon. Finally, this text ends with a summary statement in verse 25.

Notice in the first section, specifically verse 4, that the work of the Lord was not slowed by the scattering of the church, rather it was furthered. As the church was scattered, it went out preaching the word. This was certainly not what the Jewish opposition intended. One of those scattered out of Jerusalem was Philip, one of the servants of the church from chapter 6. Much like Stephen, he helped feed the Hellenist widows, and, as we see in these verses, he also preached the word and performed miraculous signs and wonders. Notice the progression in verses 5-8. He went to Samaria and proclaimed Christ, the crowds paid attention because of the miraculous works including healings and casting out demons, and the result was much joy in the city. We'll see in verse 12 that many believe in Jesus as a result. This demonstrates the purpose of miracles in the book of Acts. The evangelists perform signs and wonders so that they might show the credibility of what they are teaching. Also, the ones believing in this passage are the Samaritans. They are hated and discriminated against by the Jews who view them as mixed-blood, half-breeds. Though not fully Jewish or Gentile, these Samaritans have Jewish roots and are also waiting for God's Messiah according to their own distinct strain of Judaism. This is significant because not only are these the first Christians coming to faith outside of Jerusalem, they're also the first Christians who are not specifically Jewish. They're on the boarder between Jew and Gentile, making their conversion an important step toward Gentile inclusion in the people of God and the gospel being proclaimed to the nations which we'll see further into Acts. Philip, with the mighty work of the Holy Spirit helping, bears witness to Christ in Samaria.

In contrast to Philip, in verse 9, we read about a man named Simon. He was likely a Samaritan. He is described in the text as a magician who had the attention of the Samaritans before Philip arrived preaching the gospel. The people marveled at his magical exploits, though the text doesn't describe what they were. In the time of Luke's writing magic was practiced in order to heal, bless, curse or harm others, as well as guard against curses and demons. Surviving ancient literature often suggest that Simon would have likely practiced magic by performing incantations which invoked the names of deities or demons, the brewing and drinking of potions,

and handling magical objects like amulets or figurines. Whatever he did, he was aiming to proclaim his own greatness. Notice also that the people, thinking he was the embodiment of the power of God, also praised him as someone great. Philip showed up doing miraculous signs and wonders, drawing the people away from Simon. Notice, however, that Philip isn't drawing the crowds from Simon to himself, but from Simon to Jesus. As the Samaritans saw the signs and heard the good news, they believed and were baptized. Perhaps the most peculiar part of this text is Simon's response. In verse 13, he too believes and is baptized, amazed at Philip and following him. His magic cannot compete with the actual power of God, the Holy Spirit at work.

In verse 14, the apostles in Jerusalem hear about the work God is doing in Samaria and they send Peter and John. The apostles were still the authoritative leaders of the body, and they will serve a very distinct role in redemptive history in this regard. It seems that part of their arrival was to confirm and affirm this movement of the Spirit among the Samaritans. Notice in verses 14-17, Philip bows out of the scene and the apostles pray for the Samaritans, laying hands on them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. This believing and latter receiving the Spirit is the exception, not the normal pattern. Consider the extraordinary circumstances involved in this delayed receiving of the Spirit. With the apostles present as witnesses, there can be no doubt that these non-Jews are a part of the new covenant people of God, affirmed through the gift of the Holy Spirit. These Samaritans, who weren't Jewish enough, are welcomed into God's family. The presence and authority of the apostles, as well as the gift of the Holy Spirit, ensures that they are folded into the church as full, sincere members. This will be an important benchmark in redemptive history and it, along with the salvation of Cornelius' household in Acts 10, will show that God's people include all those who repent of their sin, believe in Jesus, and are subsequently filled with the Holy Spirit.

Simon, in verse 18, was very impressed by this new "magic" and offered the apostles money to be able to also give people the Holy Spirit. Magicians like Simon often traded money for secret knowledge, spells, or incantations; however, he misunderstood what was happening. The apostles were not magicians and they had no power or authority, like a magician invoking a spirit's name, to command God's Holy Spirit. This provoked a strong rebuke from Peter. The gift of God cannot be purchased. In verse 21, Peter's words imply that Simon is not actually a part of God's people, and his status as separate from God is built on the condition of his heart. Scholars debate whether or not Simon truly believed in verse 13, and was simply confused with his attempt to purchase this ability, or whether he was not sincerely saved. I take Peter's rebuke and the rest of the text to imply that Simon was not sincerely a believer because the language of him having "neither part nor lot in this matter" is meant to show his separation and distinction from those who are in Christ. Consider too, that in verse 23 Peter described Simon as in the gall of bitterness, but more importantly in the bond of iniquity. That seems to imply a continued slavery to sin. Peter called Simon to repent, trusting in the Lord to show mercy and forgive the intent of his wicked heart. Simon tepidly responds to Peter's call to repentance, in verse 24, asked Peter to pray for him. He's hardly remorseful, though he seems to wish to avoid this judgement. Luke and the New Testament are silent about Simon after this text; however, some early church tradition asserts that Simon went on to teach a type of false Christianity. Some even label him the father of heretics and the entire false Christian movement of Gnosticism. Ultimately, we cannot be sure of Simon's ultimate condition.

Contrasted against Simon, however, is the summary statement in verse 25. Though Simon's condition is in doubt, there was now a healthy, thriving Samaritan church. The apostles joined Philip in bearing witness to Jesus in Samaria. They preached about Jesus the whole way back to Jerusalem, sharing Jesus in many Samaritan villages. Not only did they endorse the Samaritan mission, they actively participated in it. This continued growth and spread of the gospel is, again, a part of Jesus' purpose declared in Acts 1:8. In the power of the Holy Spirit, they bore witness to Jesus in Jerusalem, and now in Samaria. The advancement of God's Kingdom cannot be stopped. The gospel witness of the church grew, instead of retreating in the wake of Stephen's death. We'll

continue to see it grow as we study further into Acts. Allow me to offer a couple of thoughts about how we apply this text today.

- 1) This text demonstrates that the gospel is for every person. There are no ethnic, racial, social, political, economic, or geographic distinctions between God's people. God will, can, does, and has saved those who have ears to hear the gospel and a heart that responds in faith to Jesus. Anyone who recognizes that they are dead in their own sin and unable to reconcile themselves to God, yet sees that Jesus died on the cross and rose again from the grave so that they could have their sins forgiven can be saved. There should be no barriers in our own efforts to share the gospel with our neighbors. Prayerfully consider who you might shy away from witnessing to, and ask God to help you see people the way he does. Praise God that Gentiles, outsiders, and sinners like us qualify to share in the inheritance of the saints, all on the basis of his grace and loving-kindness.
- 2) Salvation, grace, and the work of the Holy Spirit are not commodities to be bought. No person, priest, or magician has the ability to save anyone or dispense God's grace. Those actions are God's prerogative and he alone has the authority save. The Holy Spirit, like Jesus said in John 3, moves like the wind which we feel but can't see where he comes and goes from. Anyone claiming to perform works of the Spirit for the purpose of making much of themselves or gaining financially is misguided at best and a condemned false teacher at worst. Peter's rebuke of Simon should stand as a warning to anyone who would use the gospel for selfish gain, or to draw attention to themselves instead of Jesus. These false ones are in danger of being bound up in the gall of bitterness and found on the last day in the bond of iniquity instead of the freedom of the Spirit and the grace of Christ. We should always exercise spiritual discernment concerning the teachings we listen to and the books we read. Not everything that has the appearance of godliness is actually of God. Pray that God helps you grow in your understanding of Scripture and your ability to discern falsehood from truth.
- 3) Finally, this text should encourage us that no matter what our circumstances, God is working to advance his Kingdom. I wonder if Peter and the apostles ever had the opportunity to see and reflect on the Lord's goodness through the death of their friend. Though they don't benefit from the lens of hindsight like we do, their joy at the Lord's work expanding must have been great. Could Tyndale have imagined that millions of English-speaking people over five centuries would hear the gospel for the first time and encounter Jesus through his translation work? This is why Paul could say in Philippians 1:21, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." These men understood that no matter what happened to them, their responsibility was to be faithful to the Lord. They trusted God to preserve and grow his Kingdom. Though your life and witness may seem small, what might God use your life to accomplish in the grand story of his redemptive history? Prayerfully ask God to help you to faithfully bear witness to Jesus and trust him for the outcome. God bless you as you continue to walk with him!

Sincerely,

Pastor Bryan McClelland
First Southern Baptist Church, Williamsport, PA