

Acts 8:4-25: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 8 verses 4 to 25. Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. 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. For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralysed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city.

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. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the power of God that is called great. And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. 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. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip.

And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed. 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 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. 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. 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 prayed 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. 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.

In Acts chapter 8, the mission of the early church starts to move beyond Jerusalem. Verse 4 is a transitional text. God is achieving his purposes through his enemies.

[2 : 2 9] The persecution faced by the church in Jerusalem encourages the spread of the movement. At this point, it might also seem that the Jerusalem Christians have an advantage of not having deep roots within Jerusalem. They had sold their property, their tent pegs have been removed, and now they can move on. Persecution here is a mechanism of fulfilling chapter 1 verse 8, the calling to go beyond Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. In this way, Stephen's death ends up kicking off the mission. The scattering that happens to the church could be a negative thing, or it could be a positive thing. People can be scattered as a form of judgment. They can also be scattered as a sowing of seed. The Christians of Jerusalem are now being sown among the nations, sown throughout the empire, where they will have a much broader influence. Philip is one of those scattered, and it is in Philip that the movement from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria occurs. The Samaritans are an important feature of Luke's gospel. A Samaritan village does not receive Christ in chapter 9 verses 51 to 56. There is the parable of the Good Samaritan in chapter 10 verses 33 to 35. There is the return of the Samaritan leper to express his thanks to Christ in chapter 17 verses 16 to 18. In 2 Kings chapter 17, we read that after

Israel was deported by the Assyrians, the Assyrians repopulated the land with people from other nations, pagan peoples. Presumably there would have been a remnant of Israelites in the land, and now they've been mixed with these other groups of people. Samaritan villagers would have largely

spoken Aramaic, but in the larger towns and cities they would probably have spoken Greek and would have been largely Hellenized. They are neither Orthodox Jews nor Gentiles. In the conversation between Jesus and the woman of Samaria in John chapter 4, we have a window into some of the disputes that existed between the Samaritans and the Orthodox Jews. They worshipped the same God, but they were somewhere in between Jews and Gentiles. For the Samaritans, their holy mountain was Mount Gerizim, whereas the Jews worshipped in Jerusalem. A number of candidates have been put forward for the city that Philip probably came to in this chapter. Some have suggested that the city was Sebaste. Sebaste was a Gentile city in the Samaritan region. It was built on the site of the Old Samaria and was also a capital. Sychar, Gittow, Shechem and others have all been suggested. It is likely impossible to be certain on what city it was, besides the fact that it was an important centre of Samaritan population. Philip was introduced back in Acts chapter 6, and now he becomes a focus of the narrative. His ministry is accompanied by signs. Unclean spirits are cast out, paralysed people are healed, and lame persons are healed too. In Philip, we see that it's not just the apostles that perform signs. Other leaders of the early church are performing signs too. During the initial stages of the church's mission in a particular region, the signs and wonders would have played an important confirmatory role.

[5 : 30] The signs were the signs of the kingdom. In Luke chapter 7 verse 22, Jesus describes the signs that he performs. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear. The dead are raised up, the poor have the good news preached to them. This also draws upon Old Testament prophecy, such as Isaiah chapter 35 verses 5 to 6.

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. As Scott Spencer observes, Philip is a character juxtaposed with Simon the sorcerer. Simon works wonders, in verse 11. Philip works wonders, in verses 6 and 13. Simon draws crowds, in verses 9 to 10. Philip draws crowds, in verses 6 to 7. The people pay attention to Simon, in verses 10 to 11. The people pay attention to Philip, in verse 6. Simon is a great power, in verse 10. Philip performs great powers, in verse 13.

Simon amazes the Samaritans with his claims and with his magic, in verses 9 and 11. And Philip's miracles amaze the Samaritans, in verse 13. Craig Keener adds to this. He observes the contrast between Simon claiming to be someone great, in verses 9 and 19, and Philip only acting in the name of Jesus, in verses 12 and 16. There are a number of confrontations or contrasts with sorcerers and people performing magic arts in the book of Acts. Paul has a conflict with Elymas the sorcerer, in chapter 13 verses 6 to 11. Paul and Silas confront the Philippian slave girl, in chapter 16 verses 16 to 24. And perhaps we could also include the failed exorcism attempts of the sons of Sceva, in chapter 19 verses 13 to 16. Magic was a source of fascination and fear in the ancient world. Potions and poisons, the invoking of spirits and demons, divination and a lot of other such practices were an important part of life in ancient society. Along with various forms of idolatry, this was part of the old order that the advent of the gospel disrupted. In the Old Testament we read of conflicts with the magicians in Pharaoh's court. In Moses and Aaron, particularly in the first three plagues, the Lord proved that his power exceeded that of the arts of the Egyptian magicians. Simon Magus is mentioned by a number of people in early Christian tradition. Justin Martyr, about a century later, who himself came from the region of Samaria, wrote of Simon Magus. But much that he reports was probably later embellishment of the story. Simon claimed to be someone great, and many scholars have read this as a claim to some sort of deity. However, when the gospel came on the scene with Philip, there was a widespread conversion in response. The Samaritans were baptised, which might have been a surprise to observing Jews.

They were baptised without the theological differences between Jews and Samaritans seeming to provide an obstacle. The question of which earthly mountain you're supposed to worship upon is of slightly less import when the Lord is establishing a new temple. Simon the sorcerer is also described as having believed at this point, presumably in response to the signs. This is an indication of the greater power of Christ and his name over the magical arts of people such as Simon. In verses 14 to 17, news reaches Jerusalem of the success of the Samaritan mission, and they send Peter and John to confirm it. They must acknowledge the validity and the membership of the Samaritans. The new Davidic king has been established in Judah, and now the remnant of the northern kingdom must be joined with them, so that as one people they might go forward. Such acts

of mutual recognition are very important in the history of the church. They are a sign of the unity of the church and the Christ that exceeds all the differences that might divide us. The Samaritans had been baptised by Philip, but they had not yet received the

[9 : 22] Spirit. They received the Spirit as the apostles lay their hands upon them. The church is one apostolic church. It is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and it is important that the Samaritan mission is built on the same foundation as the rest of the church. Seeing the power of Peter to communicate the gift of the Holy Spirit by laying hands upon people, Simon the sorcerer seeks to buy the gift from him. He sees this power as something that can be bought with money. He seeks to buy office. Throughout the book of Acts, money has been an important theme. Judas betrayed Christ for silver. The early church sold their property in order to give money to the poor. Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit over money. And now Simon the sorcerer is another example of someone led astray by his love for money. In his desire for money and power, he risks his ruin. The sin of simony, the buying and selling of church office and other such sacred things, is derived from Simon the sorcerer's name.

One of the things that Simon presumes is that if he has power and wealth and influence, he ought to be able to use these things to gain status and privilege within the church. But that is not how the kingdom of God works. Peter, who could be juxtaposed with Simon, there are two Simons in the story, rebukes Simon in the very harshest of terms. Simon the sorcerer, as Peter presents him, is standing in the very greatest spiritual jeopardy. If he does not repent, he and his money will perish together. He does present Simon with hope though. He must pray to the Lord and Simon, seemingly penitent, calls upon Peter to pray for him. One of the things that the story of Simon the sorcerer reveals is the great danger among early converts of trying to put the gospel and the message of the Christian faith into the structures that were familiar from pagan practice. Even though they might accept Christ, they might try and fit Christ within the familiar framework of the old pagan ways. The Russian Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann described the effect of a sort of piety that coloured everything that was received about the Christian faith. He describes what he calls mysteriological piety as a faith in cult in its saving and sanctifying power. He observes the way that this pattern of piety inherited from paganism influenced so much about Christianity's development in those early years. It led to the idea of the church as a sanctifying cult, something that makes people holy through its buildings, through its practices, through its rites, through its clergy.

Simon the sorcerer is another example of a sort of piety that could be taken to the Christian message. Simon the sorcerer thinks in terms of magic and power and he sees the gospel in those frames too.

Familiar with the system of magic, he thinks that the gospel can be slotted into that same pattern, just as one might be able to buy magical arts from someone, he expects that he should be able to buy the power to give the Holy Spirit. Simon needs to learn that this is not the way that the kingdom of Christ works at all.

A question to consider. Why don't the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit when they first believe? Why do you think that they have to wait until Peter and John lay their hands upon them?

[12 : 40] Why do you think that they need to