

August 4, 2013

A Gospel Centered Community

A Tale of Two Men

Acts 8:14 – 40

Last week we looked at the first thirteen verses in this chapter and saw the beginning of a great gospel explosion that went out from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria, as the church got unceremoniously thrown out of their homes and separated from their familiar surroundings, and thrust into the world by a severe persecution. And we saw how God makes persecution and suffering serve His own purposes and uses it to position His church for a much greater advance and more magnificent display of His wisdom and power and love than is otherwise possible in times and places of ease and comfort and security. Because the result of the stoning of Stephen and the vicious persecution of Paul was that those who were scattered went about preaching the word. And it got out of Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria. And we saw that gospel proclamation accompanied by gospel works creates gospel community, brings gospel peace and produces gospel joy. And this really is the pattern all throughout the book of Acts. As the church fulfills its mission of bearing witness to the death and resurrection and saving power of Jesus, we see the gospel spreading throughout the world so fast that within a few years of the crucifixion of Jesus, it had covered the Roman Empire.

Last week we found that when Philip preached, those who heard believed and were baptized. And among them was this sorcerer named Simon. Simon had been amazing the people of this area for a while with his mix of occult and magic tricks to the point they were willing to believe he had the power of God. But as so often happens among people who are steeped in the occult and witchcraft, God sends a messenger of the gospel that shows them what the power of God really looks like. Even Simon was impressed, because Luke tells us: *And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.* Whatever signs and miracles Philip did, they must have been impressive for Simon to be amazed. You have to remember that this guy was referred to as the 'Great power of God' which meant that his hocus-pocus must have been fairly impressive to the people who saw him. Yet here was this refugee from Jerusalem performing such miracles that even Simon himself was impressed by them, and Luke tells us that he too believed and was baptized. Word quickly got back to Jerusalem about what was happening in Samaria: *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.* Acts 8:14-17

Now I know this causes no little consternation with people because apparently we have people who have believed in Jesus and have been baptized and yet it seems that they haven't received the Holy Spirit. So the big guns have to come down and lay hands on them so they can receive the Holy Spirit. But before we talk about what exactly is happening here, I want to confirm in your hearts that the Holy Spirit does indeed indwell a person when they believe in Jesus and doesn't wait around for someone to lay hands on them.

In speaking of authentic faith and the impartation of the Holy Spirit when a person believes, Paul told the Corinthians: *Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit.* 1 Corinthians 12:3 In other words, no one who is not a believer will ever acknowledge the lordship of Christ – only someone who has the Holy Spirit. And then to the Ephesians Paul said: *In Him [that is, in Christ] you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in Him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit,* Ephesians 1:13 When you heard the gospel and believed, Paul says – at that moment you received the promised Holy Spirit. That's pretty clear. So whatever is happening there in Samaria, it is not another step they had to take in relation to salvation. When they believed, they received. So what is happening here?

We should understand that we have the gospel for the first time going outside Jerusalem into what is essentially a foreign country. And not only to a foreign country, but to a despised people group. Historically, the Jews had no dealings with Samaritans – and vice versa. Both groups were contemptuous of each other. The Jews held that the Temple in Jerusalem was the only legitimate place to worship God; the Samaritans had built their own temple where they worshiped God. The Jews held that the Law and the Prophets were divine; the Samaritans only read the first five books of Moses and said everything after that was a man-made invention. So each group was already predisposed to discount the other religiously. But now you have the gospel coming from the Jews to the Samaritans; and from the Hellenistic Jews at that. So there was a need for identification with the apostolic leadership who were all Hebraic Jews. And I believe that was the God-ordained reason the apostles came down. It was one thing for these guys to hear the gospel and be baptized by this Hellenistic Jewish Christian, but it was another to be acknowledged and welcomed by the leaders of the Jerusalem church – by people with whom they had been historically at odds, and experience the same miraculous sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit that the church in Jerusalem experienced. The text clearly implies that what the Samaritans experienced was the same external manifestations that marked the Holy Spirit's falling at Pentecost.

Another thing we ought to keep in mind is the danger of thinking that God must do His work in exactly the same way everywhere and at every time; or trying to build a doctrine of a second work of grace as some do. If you go back to chapter one of Acts, we see three thousand people believing in Jesus and being baptized – but there is no mention of the apostles laying hands on them or the Holy Spirit falling. Peter simply tells them that they should repent and be baptized and then they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Again, pointing to the fact that when someone believes the Holy Spirit is given. But some have said, 'Ah, but you see they believed and were baptized and **then** the Holy was given – that's the way it works'. But if you skip ahead to chapter ten of Acts, we see the Holy Spirit falling on the household of Cornelius **while** Peter was still speaking – and **then** they got baptized – and we don't see Peter touching them at all. And in the second story in this text we have the Ethiopian eunuch believing, being baptized, but apparently there was no experience of this falling of the Holy Spirit – instead the Holy Spirit gets hold of Philip and whisks him off to Azotus. And I don't think Luke intends us to believe that the eunuch didn't receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, because he tells us that the guy goes on his way rejoicing.

But I don't believe Luke tells this story to stir up doctrinal debate. I believe that Luke puts these two stories back to back not so much for us to draw theological conclusions, but to illustrate the contrast between saving faith and mere assent; and to demonstrate the way God works in the spread of the gospel to different people and cultures. And He doesn't always do the same things. With the Samaritans, God shows up with signs and miracles – with the Ethiopian, He shows up in a Bible study – later with Cornelius, He shows up in a vision. God is sovereign, and He is sovereign in how He chooses to reveal Himself to anyone, anywhere, anytime. But what you can always count on is that He always uses men and women to preach the gospel and baptize people. He may appear to people in visions and dreams, but they are always directed to someone who will tell them the good news.

So we have the Samaritans believing, being baptized and then experiencing the Holy Spirit falling on them as He did on the believers in Jerusalem. And then we have Simon the sorcerer. Apparently he believed – and he got baptized along with the rest of those who believed. But there was something false about his belief. Which only serves to make the point Jesus made in Matthew thirteen when He tells the parable of the soils. When the gospel seed was sown in the rocky soil and the weed-choked soil – He says that there was an immediate response – but it was ultimately not fruitful. In other words, people can respond to either the emotion of the gospel appeal or the miraculous signs that accompany the gospel without authentic faith. And the hollowness of their belief may only be found out much later.

So Luke tells us that Simon believed and was baptized, but then he tells us this: *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, [literally – 'To hell with you and your silver!'] 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." And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me." Acts 8:18-24*

What this serves to tell us is that there is a kind of believing that is illegitimate and false. Simon believed that there was power here. He saw the signs and miracles that were evidently better than he could do; but his motive for belief was self-serving – What can God do for me? How do I get this kind of power? Simon saw the works of God and missed the person of Christ. He saw the power of God as an end in itself, not the demonstration of the power of God who is able to save. It is clear he experienced nothing of the lavish grace of God who freely gives the gift of faith and the Holy Spirit. Instead he saw this power as a means to more money. This is not unlike the prosperity preachers of today who lure the unsuspecting with promises of financial blessing if they embrace the gospel message. Only the message they preach is not the gospel but an appeal to hearts that are already prone to covet riches. And Luke doesn't leave us with the impression that Simon ever repented. Instead of asking the Lord for forgiveness he asks Peter to do it – he thinks that Peter would make a better mediator. His heart was still not right.

And then Luke turns to the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. And here we see the genuine conversion of a man without spectacular signs and miracles, but whose heart was seeking God. Of course Philip had an angel appear to him and the Spirit of God speaks to him and eventually the Spirit miraculously whisks him away – but the Ethiopian didn't know that. All he knows is that while he's traveling along reading Isaiah, puzzling over what the text was saying, all of sudden there is this middle class Jewish guy running alongside his chariot asking him if he knew what he was reading. Now you may have pictured the scene somewhat differently – the Ethiopian pulled off to the side of the road, intent on his reading when a guy comes walking by. But the text tells us that first of all Philip ran to meet the chariot – which would be unnecessary if the chariot were stopped – and then he gets invited up to sit with the guy and then in verse 36 the text tells us – 'as they were going along'.

And what stands out is the improbability of the whole thing. First of all look at the two characters in this story. Notice how different these two are. Philip is a middle class Jewish man, apparently without a job and taken to wandering deserted highways. On the other side we have an Ethiopian eunuch – He's racially different, he's a black African, he's definitely Gentile, he's a very high government official, probably wealthy, and he's been sexually altered. They couldn't be more different. And Jewish men began everyday with the prayer: 'I thank you God that you made me a man and not a woman, or a slave or a Gentile'. Jews were taught not to associate with people who weren't Jews otherwise they'd be defiled, and this guy was about as defiling a person as Philip was likely to meet. And then add to that the fact that it took an angel to get Philip even going in the right direction – and the prodding of the Holy Spirit to push him out of his comfort zone – and then he's got to run to catch up to the guy – you see how improbable it really was.

But there is no such thing as chance in God's planning. God directed Philip to a deserted stretch of road where a guy just happened to be reading a passage of Scripture describing the Messiah in Isaiah 53. *Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation (speak of His descendents)? For his life is taken away from the earth."* Acts 8:32-33 This Ethiopian had gone up to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple; but the fact is he wouldn't even have been allowed in past the Court of the Gentiles, not only because he was a foreigner and a Gentile, but he was a eunuch as well. And according to the law of the Jews, no eunuch could ever have entered the temple to worship God. So he had traveled a thousand miles to worship God only to be rejected. And yet here he was pouring over the chapters in Isaiah that have been noted as the Servant Song, and they are all about God's servant, the Messiah. And when Philip asks him if he is understanding what he reads, the eunuch replies, *And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?"* Acts 8:34 So Philip recognizes an opportunity when he sees one: *Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.* Acts 8:35

And no doubt he would have gone on to show this eunuch the wonderful promises of God to those who believed in His servant and might have taken him to Isaiah 56 where it says: *Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people"; and let not the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." For thus says the LORD: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.* Isaiah 56:3-5

Can you imagine what went through this guy's mind? Isaiah seemed to be holding out great hope for a guy like him who wanted to worship God but he was reminded of his utterly unfit status to do so when he went to the temple. No wonder he was excited to see who Isaiah was talking about, because Isaiah seemed to be saying that foreigners and eunuchs had a place in God's kingdom – foreigners would get in – dry trees would have descendants – an utter impossibility for this guy. And so Philip comes up and begins telling him about this Servant, Jesus, born in a manger, dying on a cross – becoming the Lamb who was slain. He became a leper to the lepers, He became a eunuch to the eunuchs – He was excluded that we might be included, He was rejected that we might be accepted, He was made unclean so that we might be cleansed, His life was taken away that we might live. And this eunuch's heart must have thrilled to the knowledge that no one was outside the reach of God's grace and all he can think of at this point is sealing the deal: *"See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.* Acts 8:37-38 I'd like to close with one more story.

In 1985, a man named Clarence Duncan arrived in Africa as missionary to the solidly Muslim people called the Yao who live mainly in Tanzania, Mozambique, and Malawi. When he settled in his village, he called for a meeting with the elders. After the pleasantries the chief asked him his name. Clarence replied, "Mr. Clarence." The council looked at each other for a moment and then the chief asked, "Why are you here?" Again Clarence simply said, "I want to tell your people about Isa Al Mahsi (Jesus the Messiah)." A couple months later, when the chief decided he could trust Clarence, he said, "Do you know why we allowed you to stay?" Clarence said, "I never thought about it." "Twenty-one years ago a very old Yao man came to our village and called for a meeting as you did. When we asked him his name, this Yao man said, 'Mr. Clarence'—which isn't an African name at all! When we asked him why he came, he said, 'I want to tell your people about Isa Al Mahsi.' These were your very words. Twenty-one years ago Mr. Clarence led four of our villagers to follow Jesus. So we ran them out of the village. And we killed Mr. Clarence. The reason we allowed you to stay was we were afraid."

That was 1985. In 1989 on a January morning 24 Muslim elders approached Clarence Duncan's house. After a meal the leader sat in the middle of the room and said that they had come to ask questions about Christianity. Clarence said fine but that he would only answer them by reading from the Bible so they would know he did not invent the answers. So he gave each of them a Bible in the trade language. The first question was, "Why do you Christians say that there are three gods?" Clarence said the answer was found in [Deuteronomy 6:4](#) and gave them the page: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God. The Lord is one!" And he mentioned that Isa (Jesus) said this very thing in [Mark 12:29](#). The questioning went on till five in the afternoon. When all had left, the leader, Sheik Abu Bakr, stayed and asked if he could see Clarence in a week.

When they got together in a week, Abu asked if Clarence knew why they came to see him last week. Clarence said he assumed it was to ask questions. But Abu said, "No, it was because the Christian church is growing so fast we knew we had to kill you. We had consulted for three days and prepared our magic. You were to be struck dumb when we asked questions, then fall on the ground paralyzed and then die. But when you kept talking, and even stood up and moved around, we knew you had a stronger Spirit and gave up."

Then Abu said, "I want to become a Christian." And he told an amazing story. "When I was a teenager, in our village we were not Muslim people and we were not Christian. We were Achewa people with our own religion. Behind our village was a hill where I would often go to pray. "One day I was on that hill praying. Suddenly all around me was a blinding light. Out of this light I saw a big hand coming toward me holding an open book. I looked at the book and saw writing on the page. A Voice told me to read. I protested that I could not read, never having been to school. The Voice again told me to read. So I did. And suddenly the book and the hand disappeared."

"I ran back to my village and all the people were looking for me, thinking I had died on that hill! They asked about a fire they had seen up there. When I told them the story, they laughed at me saying, You can't read! "Someone got a book and I began to read! Then people came from all around to find out more about what happened and asked questions. The Muslim authorities found out about me and I was trained in the ways of Islam. Soon all of our village became Muslim. For 15 years I was the greatest debater against the Christians." He paused and then said, "You remember when I asked you the first question about why Christians believe in three gods? Your answer was Deuteronomy chapter 6, verse 4." "That's right," Clarence said.

Sheik Abu Bakr looked Clarence Duncan in the eye and said, "That was the same passage that this Voice on the mountain showed me. At that moment I knew that the God you were talking about was the True God!" "Then why did you keep asking me all those questions the whole day?" "Because," he smiled, "I wanted all these Muslim leaders to know what the Christians believe and I wanted them to hear it from you. The whole day I pretended unbelief so that I could ask more questions. Now I want to become a Christian."

Luke tells us in the first volume of his work that his goal in writing these accounts are to give his readers a certainty, an assurance of the truth of the gospel. And God is still writing stories of the triumph of the gospel all over the earth today. **These stories are not meant to fill our heads with doctrine, but to infuse our hearts with faith.** Faith in the God who called us to Himself. Faith that the purpose of God will triumph in the world. Faith in His call to us to be His witnesses in the world. Faith in the power of God to do the miraculous. Faith in His sovereignty over all things. Faith in the message of the gospel to the world so that we would go into the world with bold assurance scattering gospel seed. We are not called to be a religious community that simply tries to live holy and separate in an unholy world. Jesus has saved us from the world to scatter us into the world to bear witness in the world to the saving power of Jesus Christ. I pray that He will write many more gospel stories with our lives.

Heavenly Father,

We thank You that You are God and we long that others should know it, feel it and rejoice in it. O that all men might love and praise You that You might have all the glory. Let Your cause and not our own engage our hearts and minds and souls and bodies. Let sinners be brought to You for Your Name's sake and let Your kingdom reign in every place where Satan now rules. May our lives be written as gospel stories that point to Your magnificent love and mercy and grace and bring in great multitudes to Jesus. May Your kingdom come, Your will be done in this world, and grant that we would be willing even to die for that. But while we live, let our labor and our strength be spent for You, and cause our hearts to delight in You through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray, in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.