

The Continuing Acts of Jesus: Faith that saves, or doesn't

Acts 8:9-25

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Please grab the Bible from the pew in front of you and open it up to Acts chapter 8. Acts 8 is an awesome chapter. It's a transition chapter, and it records the beginning of stage two in the fulfillment of Jesus' last words to His church.

And the words I'm talking about are the famous ones we have come back to again and again in this series where Jesus said to His disciples and to us: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."¹

Luke tells us that right after saying this Jesus ascended to heaven – talk about the most dramatic ride into the sunset possible. Just imagine how excited His disciples would have been in that moment. And imagine what they might have thought the fulfillment of this commission was going to look like.

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Well, whatever it was that they thought the church was going to turn into, by Acts 8 so many impossible to anticipate things have occurred that I'm sure they were not making predictions anymore. You see the show wasn't over yet.

I mean just imagine hearing a wind rushing into the room you were in and then seeing licks of fire descend and sit just above the heads of everyone there. And then everyone starts speaking different languages. And people who were afraid to speak in public, or couldn't put two words together without sticking their foot in their mouth, started preaching and people from all over the world who just happen to be in Jerusalem for Pentecost start meeting Jesus. Nobody could have seen this coming!

Or think about that lame beggar who had been by the gate of the temple for the last 40 years, but today you see him jumping around and praising God all because he asked Peter and John for some money they didn't have – nobody could make this up.

Or think of Ananias and Sapphira dying on the doorsteps of the church because they lied about how much money they were giving. That would have been a mind bender.

And all this was happening because Jesus' Spirit was on and among and in His people. And it is impossible to predict anything when the Spirit is involved.

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And then in Acts 8 we see something different happening again that none of those original disciples could have predicted. Stephen is dead, persecution is running rampant. People are fleeing Jerusalem. All this seems terrible. But in the midst of this chaos something incredible starts happening. The church explodes and everyone starts being a missionary. And Philip is the first example of this. Look at verse 12.

¹ Acts 1:8

[Read Acts 8:12]

Get your mind around how significant this is. Philip wasn't an Apostle, he had never met Jesus in the flesh, he wasn't even a Jew, and yet he was telling people about the kingdom and they were being baptized. Philip was a Greek man who had happened to be in Jerusalem, maybe at Pentecost, and he heard about Jesus, and went all in. He gave himself to serving in the church. He became a deacon and worked with Stephen taking care of the widows. And now, even while he is running for his life, he is telling people about the kingdom of God, and Samaritans are believing and getting baptized.

Jesus' words are coming true. You see the Acts 1:8 prophecy about the Holy Spirit empowering people to become Jesus' witnesses required that more than just the Apostles be involved. And that starts happening in chapter 8.

But along side this excitement we bump into someone who attempts to use the Spirit's power for his own gain, and what we get is a warning and an invitation that both extend through time to us today. So we are going to go at this text in two parts. First I want to look at what went wrong with Simon's hunger for the Holy Spirit, and then contrast this with the authentic way the Samaritans responded to Jesus.

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So let's start with Simon in verse 9.

[Read Acts 8:9-13]

So the other day the kids and I were eating oatmeal for breakfast, which is the only way I've found to fill four dinosaur tummies for a \$1.25, and Elliana looked out the window and noticed a bunch of crows sitting on the road checking out something crows find really interesting – it was crow fest.

And then Nathan, our two-year-old, wanted to see what everyone was looking at – he loves “caws”. And so he came over to the window, but instead of looking where I was pointing he kept looking at my finger. And we had this little exchange where he was saying “caws”? And I was saying “look they are over there!” And he was looking at my finger. Now everyone was excited, so he got excited, but he wasn't actually seeing any crows. He had seen the sign, but missed the crows.

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This is the warning we get in this text. And it is important because as we will see, the result of Simon's mistake was faith that didn't save.

So Simon is a sorcerer, he has been dabbling in the supernatural and using this power to amaze people. And the key word here is “amazed”: it comes up in verse 9 – Simon “amazed all the people of Samaria”. And then it comes up again in verse 11 Samaria “followed him because he had amazed them for a long time.” And then in verse 13, after Philip starts preaching about the kingdom and doing signs and miracles – the NIV says Simon was “astonished” but this is actually the same Greek word “amazed” by what he saw. And “Simon himself believed and was baptized.”

Now at this point everything looks great. All throughout Scripture we see incredible sinners encountering the grace of God and being transformed by it, and it appears that this is what had happened here. But then we find out that there is a twist. Things have started off great, but the proof in the pudding is bad. Simon's faith is false.

Look at verse 18.

[Read Acts 9:18-23]

Simon has missed the mark. Peter says "May your money perish with you." And "You have no part or share in this ministry" and "your heart is not right with God." And then "Repent of this wickedness... in the hope [God] may forgive you." And finally "For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."

These are not words used to describe a saved person. So even though Simon believed and was baptized we see here that there is such thing as faith that does not save.

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Now this isn't the only time faith like this is described in scripture. So in the parable of the four soils Jesus tells us some people are like the second soil.

Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. Luke 8:13

Jesus says there is belief that doesn't save, and it shows it self to be such in the end.

Paul gives us the same thing in Corinthians where we read:

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:1-2)

So Simon did believe, he had an encounter with the power of God, but this genuine encounter produced a faith that was not genuine in Simon. And this is Luke's warning.

But he doesn't leave us here, instead he shows us why Simon's faith failed. And that is because faith is something that only counts if it is in the right thing.

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When I was a student I worked at Earl's restaurant in Vancouver. And one day I was speaking with one of the waitress about faith and she responded. "You are right Dan. I'm a spiritual person too. I totally agree, we just have to have faith." But when I asked her what she had faith in she didn't have an answer.

For this girl, faith was something you could put in your pocket, but the reality is faith has to be in something, it needs a strong subject, in order to be legitimate.

And here we see that Simon's faith is misplaced. He was amazed by the signs Philip was performing, but he wasn't amazed by the grace of Jesus.

And it's not hard to see where this came from. Simon was a sorcerer. So he was used to tapping into a source to get power. And I suspect he had tasted real power. And he had used this power to get him the kind of "great" life he wanted. But when Philip showed up and (verse 7) started casting out demons, Simon realized the power Philip had was greater than his own. And he wanted this for himself. And he thought, "if I join Jesus' side I will have access to this greater power, and my life will be greater."

And so he believes and gets baptised, and then he approaches Philip and tries to buy in. Now Simon isn't doubting here. He knows there is real power in the name of Jesus, but his eyes have got caught on the end of the finger instead of following the sign to where it is pointing – the grace of Jesus.

He believes that it is power that is going to get him what he wants, he doesn't believe he needs to bow at the foot of the cross as a sinner in need of a Saviour.

So because it is the signs that Simon has faith in instead of Jesus, Simon's faith was in the wrong thing and so isn't saving faith. This is why in verse 21 Peter tells him, you need to repent because "your heart is not right before God."

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You see Simon isn't simply a toddler like Nathan innocently misunderstanding that the sign of a pointed finger is telling you to look along the trajectory that continues from the end of the finger until it finds the "caws". Simon is a man who is attempting to use the supernatural to accomplish his own means.

But while the devil might do this God never trades His power for our souls. He doesn't have to. We have nothing He needs. You see God isn't sitting up in heaven saying "Oh, I sure wish I could get George to believe in Me. He would be such a great witness, and then My kingdom could really grow."

God builds His kingdom with or without us. Now yes, He wants us to come to faith in Him, but it isn't because we have anything He needs. In fact God is both the primary creditor and beneficiary when we come to faith. He gives grace in exchange for nothing, and when we are transformed by it He gets the glory. In this transaction we are the secondary beneficiaries – salvation works out great for us. But we don't give God anything for it.

But Simon doesn't get this. He has seen the power. He knows God is real. But He hasn't recognize he is a sinner. He isn't looking for a Saviour. Verse 9 tells us he wants to be the great one. He wants to be God in his life and maybe other people's as well. Now this is something Satan is all right with, but it is something Jesus will never submit to. Jesus will be God in our life, or He will have nothing to do with us at all.

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Then we get verse 24.

[Read Acts 8:24]

Now some people think Simon came around in the end, but that is unlikely by what we see here. On top of this several of the other Christian writers of the early church² talk about how Simon went on to become a heretic and not a true follower of Jesus.

So notice Simon doesn't want God's punishment, but he never actually repents. And that's because he wants to be followed. He doesn't want to follow Jesus. So because he refuses to see himself as a sinner in need of a Saviour, his faith is not saving faith.

And so the warning of this text is clear; there are many real things that point to Jesus that we can get caught up on. Certainly the signs and wonders Philip was performing were real. But unless these signs point us to saving faith in Jesus we have missed their purpose.

And there are many things that people get caught up on today. So some people love great preaching. And certainly preaching exists to point people to Jesus, but we have all probably bumped into someone who enjoys hearing a great sermon, but who hasn't followed the preaching to submit their lives to Jesus.

Other people love coming to church. For them their attendance makes them good people, but church isn't an end in itself. It is supposed to point us to the Head of the body – Jesus. Other people revel in the logic of apologetics. Others love Creation Science and love to argue against evolution. Now all these things are good unless a person is more excited about them than about saving faith in Jesus. Simon's story shows us that even correct signs can be used incorrectly.

So friends, where does your passion lie? Is your first love imaging Jesus to the glory of God with the abilities you've been given? Do you live to please Jesus and make His glory known? If yes, then the signs you have followed have lead you to saving faith.

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I want to transition now to look a bit more at saving faith and the encounter that the rest of the Samaritans had when they heard Philip. And here I want to ask the question, what does it mean when a person receives the Holy Spirit, and how do you know if this has happened? And the reason I want to ask this is because everyone who has the Holy Spirit has real faith. So look with me at verse 14.

[Read Acts 8:14-17]

Now right from the beginning of Acts the Holy Spirit has been the primary character in the book. So Peter and Paul aren't the main characters, and here Philip isn't the main character. The one who is doing the stuff in Acts is Jesus' Spirit. And so here the signs and miracles are done by the Spirit. Yes, Philip is the guy who is standing there, but

² Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Jerome among others

Simon's mistake was to think that Philip was someone special. The reality is only Jesus has the power to do this stuff.

But Jesus' promise to His followers was that He would fill us with His Spirit, and it would be the Spirit who would transform us into witnesses who would take His message to the ends of the earth. And it is people who have Jesus' Spirit in them who can be His witnesses because we've been saved by Him.

But the tricky thing is that there is disagreement about what it looks like to be filled with the Spirit. So some Christian traditions believe that the filling of the Spirit happens after people become Christians. It's kind of like a second baptism. And when this happens you are changed from a Christian to a Spirit-filled Christian. And I mention this because these verses in Acts 8 are central to this understanding. The people here believed, and then later received the Spirit.

The difficulty with this is that the majority of the Evangelical tradition holds that the Spirit is given at conversion. And it bases this on verses like Romans 8 where Paul says:

You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. (Romans 8:9)

Paul says there are two kinds of people, Jesus people and flesh people. And the difference between them is that Jesus people have the Spirit. There is no such thing as someone who has given their life to Jesus but who doesn't have the Spirit.

Now there is a lot more that could be said on this debate – particularly as we look at Acts 8 – we could talk about whether this experience is prescriptive or descriptive. We could talk about whether it is normative or just situational. We could argue over whether the Samaritans had really become Christians, or whether like Simon they were only partial believers. But in doing that the risk would be that we would get caught up in a secondary point of this text. The main point of this text, and every other text, is to draw us into Jesus and His grace. And that's where I want to end today.

So here is the point in Acts, Jesus is the one who sends the Spirit. And He promised the church:

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

And then throughout Acts there are all sorts of stories of this happening. So the first time it happens is at Pentecost. And the result of the Spirit's "filling" was that people start praising the mighty works of God in languages they don't know.³ A little later when the apostles are hauled before the court and commanded not to speak in the name of Jesus, they respond that they have to obey God rather than men because He has "given" them His Spirit.⁴

³ 2:4; 11

⁴ 5:32

And then in Samaria, in our text today, the Spirit “fell” and caused great signs and miracles to occur. In the next chapter Saul is turned into Paul by the filling of the Spirit and the result is a murderer is transformed into an extraordinary witness of Jesus the Messiah.⁵ Then in chapter 10 the Spirit is “poured out” on Cornelius and his family and they start speaking in tongues and praising God.⁶ A little later Paul comes across some disciples of John the Baptist and the Holy Spirit “comes upon them” and they start prophesying and speaking in tongues.

So every time the Spirit is received something dramatic happens in the book of Acts. But the sign that the Spirit is present varies. Sometimes there are tongues, sometimes there is prophecy, sometimes boldness, sometimes obedience, and sometimes there are signs and wonders.

There are only two things that are consistent throughout all of these accounts. The first is that a person is not the same once they have the Spirit on them. So Luke expects that the receiving of the Spirit is going to make a real difference in your life.

The second thing that is consistent throughout all of these accounts is that when the Spirit comes on people they receive the power necessary to evangelize the world. So God gets glory when the Spirit comes on people.

Again this is the problem Simon ran into. He wanted God’s power for his own glory. But the Spirit only works for the glory of God. And so when He gives it out the result is people are drawn to Jesus.

So in Acts sometimes people speak in tongues in order to preach the wonders of God. Sometimes people prophecy so that the truth of God can be declared. And in verse 12 today, signs and wonders are performed as Philip “proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ.”

So in each of these instances the power of the Spirit serves the purpose Jesus prophesied in Acts 1:8, it transforms people into His witnesses. And while there is no promise in Acts that when the Spirit comes on you then you will speak in tongues or prophecy or do signs and wonders, there is a promise that you and I will be transformed into Jesus’ witnesses and empowered to take His message to the ends of the earth.

And so the invitation and the question for us is “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”

So let me give us a few examples of how we can answer this essential question in the affirmative.⁷

⁵ 9:17;22

⁶ 10:46

⁷ Conclusion adapted from John Piper <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/what-does-it-mean-to-receive-the-holy-spirit> (Accessed August 11, 2017)

You can say “yes I did” if you’ve seen the Spirit of obedience at work in your life subduing sin and leading you towards acts of love. This is something the Spirit does.

You can say “yes I did” if your heart wells up with desire to praise God and you love to give Him your worship. This is something the Spirit does inside a person.

You can say “yes I did” if you’ve seen fear overcome in your life by courage and a willingness to risk things for the cause of Christ. The Spirit does this.

And you certainly you can say “yes I did” if together with these other signs you’ve been given gifts of tongues or prophecy or miracles or service or teaching or giving or mercy or any number of other gifts of the Spirit that have enabled you to bring glory to God. The Spirit is the one who accomplishes these things in a person, and He is still in the business of pouring His power out today.

So I urge you to look at your life and be encouraged by the evidence you see that points to the filling of the Spirit.

But I would be amiss if I didn’t also say “if you look at your life and you can’t answer the question this morning “Did you receive the Spirit when you believed?” Then it could mean one of three things. First, it may be that you have not believed in a saving way and you need to do that as we close this service. Maybe you’re like Simon, you’ve gotten wrapped up in the signs but not in the saving grace of Jesus.

Or second, it could mean that for some reason there has been a delay or a blockage in the manifestation of God’s power in your life. I think this is what happened to the Samaritans in Acts 8. And so you need to seek His fullness in prayer. You can do that as well as we draw to a close. Or third, it could be that God is doing more in your life than you are aware of because you have never been taught how to recognize what the work of God looks like in a person.

In any of these three cases, I urge you to pray as we close. Declare your faith in Jesus to Jesus. And ask Him to pour His Spirit into your life that you might be transformed into His witness. And ask for the ability to discern Him working.

I love you. Let me lead you in prayer.