

"The Gift That Couldn't Be Bought"

Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"

Acts 8:2-25

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Acts 8:2-25

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² Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. ³ But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.

Philip in Samaria

⁴ Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. ⁵ Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ^[a] there. ⁶ When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. ⁷ With shrieks, evil^[b] spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. ⁸ So there was great joy in that city.

Simon the Sorcerer

⁹ Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, ¹⁰ and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is the divine power known as the Great Power." ¹¹ They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. ¹² But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. ¹³ Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

¹⁴ When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. ¹⁵ When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into^[c] the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸ When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money ¹⁹ and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

²⁰ Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! ²¹ You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. ²² Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. ²³ For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."

²⁴ Then Simon answered, "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me."

²⁵ When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.

Footnotes:

- a. [Acts 8:5](#) Or *Messiah*
- b. [Acts 8:7](#) Greek *unclean*
- c. [Acts 8:16](#) Or *in*

Introduction.

There is a story told in China of a man who raised horses for a living. One day one of his prized stallions ran away, and his neighbors gathered around to offer him condolences over his loss. But the old man, being a wise person, said, "How do I know whether what has happened is actually bad or good? We shall wait and see."

A couple of days later the stallion returned leading 6 other wild horses with him. The friends gathered once again, now in joy, and said, "Well, what a wonderful thing has happened. This is good. Who would have thought it possible?" But the wise man said, "How do I know yet whether this is a good thing or a bad thing? We shall wait and see."



The next day the stallion kicked his son so hard that it broke the boy's leg. The friends gathered around a third time and said, "Oh, this is so sad what has happened to you." But again, the wise old man responded, "How do I know whether this is good or bad? We shall wait and see."

It just so happened that the next day a war broke out in their part of the country, and the son with the broken leg was exempted from having to go into military service. The friends gathered around once again, and you can guess, the story went on and on.

So much of life depends on the way we look at our circumstances. What appears to be a blessing may actually be a curse, and what looks at first like an awful turn of events may prove to be the best thing that could have possibly happened to us.

This morning we look at a passage which tells the scattering of the early church because of a new wave of persecution. But the amazing reality is that what looked so bad in the beginning was actually God's blessing in disguise. In the course of our time together, I want you to notice three things about this passage: a new wave of persecution; a question about the Holy Spirit; and a gift that couldn't be bought.

I. A New Wave Of Persecution.

The passage ends with a joyous event in which many people in Samaria came to Christ. But before this takes place, the text tells us, "*On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria*" (8:1). Try to imagine what this must have felt like to the early followers of Christ. In Acts 2 we read that the church was an exciting place to be. They were eating in one another's homes, no one had any financial needs, and they shared what they had with each other. In addition, they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to prayer. There was power in the early church, miracles took place, and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Oh sure, there had been a couple of problems along the way. Some of the Greek-speaking widows had been overlooked, and two people battled pride that led to deception. But by and large, the early church was quite an amazing place. Then the world changed. Stephen was martyred, and Saul began to arrest Christians and throw them into jail. Everyone but the apostles had to leave Jerusalem, and the text says that Saul began to destroy the church. The whole experience must have been very discouraging.

Have you ever had that happen to you? Things are going well, you can see the Lord working in your life, and you feel His power. Then your world starts to fall apart, and you wonder what went wrong. It feels like the wheels come off and you spiral down in confusion and sadness. It's in times like these that we begin to doubt ourselves, and we begin to doubt the Lord. I'm sure these early Christians did.

What could have been a shattering experience to the early followers of Jesus proved to be the means by which God sent them out into the world to further His mission. Persecution took them to places they had already been told to go, but had not yet gone. You will recall Jesus told His disciples in Acts 1 they were to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth. Yet they were content to remain in Jerusalem where great things were going so great.

Who could blame them? Isn't that what we tend to do? Good things happen, we feel close to the Lord, and we want it to last forever. But God says, "No. I have another plan for you," and He moves us out.

When Jesus took Peter, James and John up the Mount of Transfiguration, the Bible tells us that the Lord was transformed before their eyes, and His clothes glowed brilliantly white. The disciples saw Christ speaking in this transfigured state with Moses, the great representative of the law, and Elijah, the



great representative of the prophets. When the vision came to an end, Peter said, "Let's stay here on this mountain, and let's build three shrines – one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He wanted the mountain top experience to last forever.

But Jesus said, "No, we must return to the valley." And when they went down, they encountered someone who needed them, misunderstanding, and the power of evil itself. How unsettling it must have been for the disciples. One minute they were caught up in worship with a heavenly vision, and the next minute they were back in the valley slugging it out with Devil.

In what ways do you feel like God is tearing your world apart? How have the circumstances pushed you out of your comfort zone? Remember, the mountaintop experience is only meant to equip us to return to the valley and carry on His mission of love in a broken world. The persecution of the early church was not shattering; it was a scattering, and God used it as a part of His great plan to win the world to Christ

II. A Question About The Holy Spirit.

The text tells us, "*Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. ...So there was great joy in that city*" (8:5,6,8). The word that is translated "proclaimed" literally means "to herald." Later on in this chapter Luke uses the verb *euangelidzo* 5 times, which means "to bring good news." Philip the deacon became Philip the evangelist. He shared Jesus with the Samaritans, and the result was that many people came to Christ in that city.

Before Philip arrived, this city in Samaria had been under a very different kind of influence. A man named Simon practiced sorcery there, and he amazed the people of Samaria with his magical arts and extravagant claims. He boasted that he was someone great, perhaps a god. Even Simon professed faith in Jesus Christ, and he wanted to embrace the good news of God's love.

When the apostles heard about the conversion of the Samaritans, they sent Peter and John to check things out. It was particularly appropriate that John should go since Luke relates in his gospel that on one occasion John asked Jesus if he should call down fire from heaven to consume a Samaritan city when they rejected the gospel (Lk. 9:51-56). The very disciple who previously wanted God to pour out His judgment on the Samaritans was there when God poured out His Spirit and His blessing.

When the apostles arrived, they discovered a problem. Even though the Samaritans had received both the gospel and Christian baptism, apparently they had not yet received the Holy Spirit. Peter and John placed their hands on them, prayed for them, and in answer to their prayers, the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit. Presumably, this was confirmed by speaking in tongues as had occurred on the day of Pentecost.

NT scholar I. Howard Marshall suggests this is perhaps the most extraordinary statement in the book of Acts.ⁱ You will recall that Peter said in a previous sermon that the gift of the Spirit was available to all those who repented and were baptized (2:38). How, then, could the Samaritans have believed and been baptized and not receive the Spirit? The answer is what happened in Samaria was a new in-breaking of the work of God in the world. The delay of the gift of the Holy Spirit here, which was accompanied by the speaking in tongues, is because this was the first occasion in which the gospel had been proclaimed not only outside Jerusalem but also inside Samaria, and an act of authentication by the Spirit was necessary to validate this new work of the Lord.

Remember, hostility had existed between the Jews and the Samaritans for centuries, and a schism resulted because of their racial and theological differences. The animosity was intense. Now the



Samaritans were responding to the gospel. It was a significant moment for the advancement of the Kingdom which also had the potential for significant problems.

What would happen now? Would the long-standing rift between Jews and Samaritans continue in the early church? Would the Samaritans be welcomed into the fellowship? Or would Christ be torn apart into two different churches as a result? In order to avoid these problems, it seems the giving of the Spirit was delayed in order to give the apostles the opportunity to be a part of the blessing. This would be the best way to bring a unity to the body of Christ where there was potential for profound racial conflict.

This text reminds us that God has no favorite color. The Jews with their racial purity were no better than the Samaritans who had intermarried. The passage says that all people - white, black, red, yellow, and brown - belong in the kingdom of God.

We all have to battle against prejudice and fear that creeps into our hearts whenever we encounter people who are different from us. As Christians, we are called to repent of racism and prejudice in all its ugly forms. We are to remember that the Bible says in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free, black or white, young or old, or rich or poor! Rather, we are all one in Christ Jesus our Lord!

III. The Gift that Couldn't be Bought.

We read in verse 18 when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money in exchange for the power to impart the Spirit himself. Peter reprimanded Simon publicly for thinking that the gift of God could be bought. The apostle added that Simon could have no share in this ministry because his heart was not right before God, and he called Simon to repent and pray to the Lord. Peter also discerned that Simon's heart was full of bitterness and he captive to sin.

We have all been tempted to bargain with God. We think, "If I make this sacrifice for God, then He will bless me." "If I work hard at living the Christian life, God will protect my kids." The grace of God is not something for which we can bargain. It is a free gift that is unmerited and undeserved.

Did you hear about the little boy who wanted a bike in the worst way for Christmas? So in desperation he took the Virgin Mary from the nativity scene in their home and wrote a note to Jesus that read: "I'VE GOT YOUR MAMA. IF YOU WANT TO EVER SEE HER AGAIN, SEND THE BIKE. SIGNED, YOU KNOW WHO."

Simon the Sorcerer may have been the first person who has attempted to turn the spiritual into the commercial, but he was certainly not the last, and throughout history people have sought to turn a profit with the things of God. It has been said that Christianity started out as a way of life in Palestine. It moved to Rome and became an institution. It moved to Europe and became a culture. And it moved to America and became a commercial enterprise!

I remember a number of years ago watching a television evangelist who achieved some popularity in the Dallas area. He promoted success in living. Since then he has been exposed for fraud as he bilked people of their money, and he went to prison for it. Back then a college student in our ministry used to watch the TV program for laughs. One day he ordered two prayer cloths which were anointed with oil and purportedly prayed over by this man. The student gave one to me as a joke. I read the instructions which said, "Apply this prayer cloth to your point of need, and receive the blessing of God!" Well, I put it on my head one night and slept with it all evening, but I still woke up bald!



Or it's like the minister who said, "If you send me \$50, I'll send you 20 soul winning booklets. If you send me \$500, I'll send you a book of my life's story, *Turn or Burn*. And if you send me \$5,000, I'll send you a postcard from Acapulco!"

The things of God cannot be bought, and the gospel of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit should never be sold. The grace of God is free for the asking.

Conclusion/Application.

As we close this morning, let me ask you, **Is your commitment to Christ genuine, or are you just in it for what you can get from God?** Simon the sorcerer made a profession of faith. He publicly identified with Christ and was baptized. He was enrolled in the membership of the church there in Samaria. But he wasn't genuine in his commitment. Peter said to him sternly, "*You have no share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord.... I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.*"

Are you genuine in your faith in Christ, or are you just trying to make a bargain with God? Where are you with Jesus today?

Finally, can you look at the events of your life and believe that God works all things together for your good? Have the events of your life in recent months been a shattering experience, or have they been a scattering one for you? Can you trust that God has a good plan, and He will use even the painful things that have happened for good?

I close with this story. In Longmont, Colorado, near Boulder where I used to live, there is a plaque on a street in that city which marks a spot where a butcher shop once opened and then the owner went bankrupt. Now, why in the world would there would be a plaque on a street in Longmont for a butcher shop that went bankrupt? Well, the plaque goes on to say, "The owner of this shop moved to Wyoming and opened a dry goods store , and he enjoyed a measure of success."

The man's name was James Cash Penny, and, as Paul Harvey would say, now you know the rest of the story. J.C. Penny was a follower of Jesus Christ, and he did not let the disappointment of his failure in Longmont keep him from serving the Lord to the best of his ability. He trusted God that if things didn't work out in his first enterprise, God had something better in store for him. And He did.

Have the recent events of your life been shattering, or have they been scattering, putting you in just the right place where Christ wants to use you? Trust in the Lord, and look for the ways in which God will use even the disappointments and set-backs of your life for His glory. Amen.

¹I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, p.157.

