

Title

Littlebourne - 15th January 2023 - Acts 8:9-25

Last week, we saw the church becoming scattered after the persecution ramped up. Philip went off to Samaria, where he preaches in the city and gets a good reception. verse 6-8:

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.

Back in Acts 1:8, Jesus tells the Apostles:

8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

So far in Acts, we've seen this in Pentecost in Jerusalem, now we're seeing the spread to the surrounding areas, Judea and Samaria. Later in Acts, we continue into the ends of what would have been the known world for the Apostles. Today, we could say that the gospel has penetrated almost the entire earth in some form - there are tiny pockets where the gospel hasn't ever reached, such as North Sentinel Island, but these are very much exceptions.

We also see the spread in terms of the types of people that receive the Holy Spirit - first it was the Apostles and those close to them, then as they went public, more people, then we read of Hellenistic Jews, that is, Jews that were foreign to Jerusalem and more culturally Greek, now we see the expansion to the Samaritans. Samaritans were these sort of quasi Jewish people - they had the Old Testament, like the Jews, but weren't ethnically Jewish. So the groups of people that receive the Holy Spirit are growing, and we know that it's not long before complete gentiles are in as well.

v9-11

9 But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practised 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.

Our passage immediately introduces this man Simon the magician or Simon the sorcerer, often called Simon Magus. The passage says he previously practiced magic (the greek verb is μαγεύω / mageuo). This is translated as either magic or sorcery, depending on translation.

We've seen Judas in the gospels as maybe the first false convert in the New Testament, now the first false convert we know of in Acts is this Simon. As we move through the passage, I think we'll see how he was a false convert, but first, let's notice the warning signs before Philip arrives.

Simon looks here to be a man of pride and self-centred attitude. He doesn't just perform this magic and do things the people consider amazing , but he says himself that he is someone great. And his greatness is something that comes from his magic or sorcery.

I don't think it's clear here whether Simon was merely a deceptive magician, a slight of hand type magician, tricking people, or whether this is sorcery in the sense of magic in cooperation with the demonic. Either way, Simon's sin is grave, if he joins in with those saying that this magic is attributable to God.

Simon is deceiving others, and he is deceiving himself as to his own position. Simon's first problem is his wrong view of self.

v12-13

12 But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised, both men and women. 13 Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptised he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

Now Philip arrives in the area where Simon is and is preaching the good news, and as we saw in the passage last week, he is performing signs as well. People are healed, unclean spirits are cast out. The signs and the preaching lead to many believing.

Simon too believes and is baptised. Simon may well have done the outward signs of becoming a Christian, that is professing belief and baptism, but as we'll see, he is lacking the change on the inside. Is Simon just going with the crowd, not wanting to be left behind? At this point maybe Simon is even thinking that this was his path to being as powerful as he saw Philip to be.

Simon could tell the difference between the signs he performed and those performed by Philip. The miracles that Philip performs, or rather that God performs through Philip, are amazing to Simon. The impression is that Simon thinks these are really another level compared to whatever he was doing before.

v14-16

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 baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Now this part of the passage may confuse us. What does it mean that the believers there had not had the Holy Spirit 'come upon' or 'fall upon' them?

Those of you that have been at St Andrew's over the last few years probably know the mnemonic - North, East, South, West - for the different things the Holy Spirit does for us.

- North - New life, that is regeneration and application of salvation to us.
- South - Sanctification, that is the ongoing work of conforming us to Christ, becoming better people.
- East - Empowerment, that is the outward and often more obvious work of the Spirit to empower us in certain works, or Spiritual gifts.
- West - We / fellowship, that is the Spirit unites us all together in a way that is more than just the earthly relationships we have.

Now the big question in this passage is whether the believers had the Holy Spirit *at all*, or whether they had the Holy Spirit in part already, or in not quite the fullness that they would have shortly.

I think it's helpful to think about what the apostles themselves went through in terms of receiving the Holy Spirit. We first see the disciples receive the Spirit in John 20 - Jesus has just risen from the dead, and appears to the disciples.

19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

21 Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." 22 And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Now we can keep reading and see that nothing outwardly special comes of this - the next paragraph is Thomas doubting, then there's a week's gap and Jesus comes to them again. Jesus said 'Receive the Holy Spirit', but this wasn't like Pentecost. The first instance of receiving the Spirit, you'd be forgiven for thinking nothing happened.

Only later, in Acts 2, do we see the Spirit again being received, this time at Pentecost it's not quiet and inward, but bombastic and outward. Flame and supernatural ability to speak other languages - it's very different.

In Acts 4, Peter is again filled with the Spirit, given the ability to preach and face the Sanhedrin fearlessly. This time, it's a sort of in-between, the filling of the Spirit has outward obvious effect on Peter, but it's not like Pentecost.

The point is, that it seems normal for those we're reading about to be filled with the Spirit multiple times, and in some different ways. When we read about people being filled with the Spirit, we are not necessarily reading about a conversion experience, not about the N - New life - work of the Spirit, but about the E - empowerment. When we see an instance of this empowerment at a specific time, we sometimes refer to this as a baptism of the Spirit, baptism of course meaning to be immersed. There are times when we can be immersed in the Spirit in a way that is more than usual.

Now to be clear, all true believers have the Spirit. Without the Spirit's work, the New Life, the application of salvation to us, we would be lost. In this passage, it's safe to assume that the bulk of these believing, baptised people are filled with the Spirit already - they are true believers - but that they haven't experienced the greater power of the Spirit as those in Jerusalem had.

v17

17 Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.

As we saw in Acts 1, the spread of the gospel would go out from Jerusalem, to the surrounding areas, Judea and Samaria, and then beyond to the ends of the earth. Just as the Spirit came in power at Pentecost, in Jerusalem, so now we see the Spirit coming in some outwardly obvious way on the people of Samaria. We're seeing evidence that they are truly saved people.

We might ask why the apostles had to come for this to take place. Well we don't know that they did have to, but I think this is part of God's way of making clear the expansion of the gospel to all people. In coming chapters, we'll see the dispute about whether the gentiles are to receive the gospel too. In the expansion of the gospel from the apostles and disciples in Jerusalem, to the Hellenistic Jews who were less culturally Jewish, to the quasi-Jewish people in Samaria, who were not ethnically Jewish but were religiously similar, to the gentiles, who were not Jewish at all, we also see the confirmation of the reception of the gospel, in the Spirit's actions in this spread.

Peter needed to be led to the idea that even gentiles are eligible for salvation - his vision in chapter 10. But before that we see Peter seeing for himself that these ever further groups of people are able to receive the Holy Spirit. Maybe the reason that this act of the Spirit was kept until Peter and John arrived was to show them clearly the pattern at work - that ever wider groups of people are saved.

At the of Acts 10, we see gentiles filled with the Holy Spirit. In that instance, they are baptised in the Spirit before they are baptised with water - the opposite way round to this passage, so it's not that one must come before the other. Both are outward signs of inward transformation.

Second class Christians

Before we get back to Simon, there are some out there that take a slightly different view of things. This passage is sometimes used as a proof text for the idea that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a particular event in a believer's life, after conversion, and that we can divide up believers into those that have had it and those that haven't.

You've probably heard of people that think that all 'real' believers speak in tongues, that if you don't speak in tongues, you haven't had the baptism of the spirit, and you're therefore a second class christian at best. Whilst today, this is associated the extremes of Pentecostalism, a branch of Christianity that is fairly recent, the idea of this actually goes back much further to the second century, with the Montanists, who were a group that, amongst other things, thought a two tier Christianity - those with the Spirit and those without. That, and plenty of other problems led them to be rejected by the rest of the church.

Scripture is clear about this - whilst some have different Spiritual gifts, different experiences of the work of the Spirit, there is no second class of Christians. We are all one body, in Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:12-13:

12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in one Spirit we were all baptised into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

But now back to Simon.

v18-19

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."

So now we see clearly what mindset Simon had. Simon misunderstands the Spirit. Simon is treating the Spirit like something that can be bought and sold, he's treating the Spirit like it's a methodology, or a power, or a trick.

But the Spirit is a person - the Spirit is God Himself, the third person of the Trinity.

Jehovah's Witnesses for example get this wrong - they define the Spirit as God's 'active force' - they can't ignore the existence of the Spirit, but they've rejected the Trinity, so they have to explain Him somehow. So when they read of people being filled with the spirit, they read it like they've had a sort of energy boost. God's given them the equivalent of heavenly energy drink.

But the great news of being filled with the Spirit is that the Spirit is more than just a force, more than just energy, but a person. It's not that we're given sufficient heavenly caffeine to then apply to our own efforts, but that the Spirit Himself actually is at work, doing more than just supplying extra energy, but actually working with us.

Simon must not understand that the Spirit is a person, much less understand that the Spirit is God Himself. Anyone that understood that would not think to ask if He could buy God - what could you possibly give in exchange?

So Simon doesn't understand what he's really asking, and shows that he doesn't understand what happened to those people and how, he doesn't understand salvation or the Spirit. What he's really asking for is the ability of the apostles, the office of the apostles.

We have a little used word for the act of trying to buy your way into ecclesiastical office, Simony, named after this very man's example.

v20-23

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."

Peter's response makes clear that Simon is in the wrong.

First, Peter makes clear that the work of the Spirit in us is a gift - as a part of our salvation it is a gift, in the times of greater filling with the Spirit, it is a gift - we can't purchase it, we can't earn it, nothing we do makes us deserve it, but the Spirit gives Himself freely to those he wills.

Next, Peter makes clear that the heart of the matter is Simon's heart. It's not just that Simon has done the wrong thing, though he has, but the underlying matter, the root cause is Simon's heart, his desires, his self-centred-ness. He hasn't really been transformed by the Spirit himself - he is not saved.

Peter gives the solution - repent and believe and pray to God that you can be forgiven for what you've done. The problem was the heart, the solution is the changing of the heart, the turning around of the heart to go in the other direction in repentance.

Peter finishes with two odd phrases - the gall of bitterness, and the bond of iniquity.

The gall of bitterness - the insolence and expression of being bitter, envious. Simon is not taking the news well that he's a bad person - Peter makes out that he is bitter and angry about what he can't have.

He's also in the bond of iniquity - that is, that evil has a hold on him. He's in union with, tied up by his wrongdoings - again, it's his heart and desires that are the issue - he desires this wrongdoing and evil.

v24

24 And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

In his answer to Peter, Simon shows that he is not repentant. He has not understood his sinfulness. He does not do as Peter says - he does not repent, he does not pray.

In fact, he effectively says, in his answer - you can read it sort of sarcastically - that he doesn't believe Peter's words to him.

You pray for me. You think this is what will happen, so why don't you, Mr. Christian do the praying here. It's your concern, not mine.

He again, is not right in his heart - he has not recognised his condition, and he rejects the news of his condition when it's pointed out to him.

We were reading Romans 1 at the men's Bible study on Friday, and Paul makes clear there that this is the condition of sinful man - we, though knowing the truth, reject it. This is exactly what Simon here is doing.

v25

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.

So after this episode, the apostles return to Jerusalem, preaching along the way. Philip will next week be travelling in another direction and preaching as he goes.

Conclusion

To sum up, Simon had an erroneous view of things. He had an erroneous view of his own self, thinking more of himself than warranted and being prideful. He had an erroneous view of salvation, thinking that he could just do the things and get in, without inner change. He had an erroneous view of the Spirit, thinking that He could be bought, or that the Spirit was something for personal gain. And he had an erroneous view of sin, thinking that his sin was not important, not recognising his own problematic state.