A New Covenant Transition

Acts 8:14-15

Last week it was Simon the Sorcerer. Simon the Magician. With a focus upon the dangers of sorcery, soothsaying, magic arts, witchcraft, interpreting omens, and mediums—all attempts to know the secret knowledge which belongs to God, particularly regarding the future. Such an attempt is forbidden for God's people, as we are called to focus upon that which God has revealed to us, through his word. Ultimately, as I emphasized, such a pursuit of sorcery and black magic is a denial of the sufficiency of God's word, a word which became flesh in the person of Jesus. So the pursuit of the secret knowledge of the occult is a denial of Jesus himself.

In that context, we saw that Simon became a believer.

v.12 "But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. 13 Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done."

We come back to Simon this morning, but now he is shown to be worthy of rebuke, a rebuke so strong it seems to be a condemnation. His sin was that great.

v.18 "And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, 19 saying, "Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

Peter's rebuke was appropriately harsh.

v.20 But Peter said to him, "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! 21 You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. 22 Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. 23 For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity."

All of those words create a very interesting question. Was Simon a believer or not? Was he a Christian? I emphasized last week that I believe that he was, taking at face value what Luke writes.

v.13 "Then Simon himself also believed."

But then we see his sin, and his rebuke by the apostle. So it is either that he truly believed and was saved, only to need significant correction for a very serious offense. Or his offense, his sin, was of such gravity that it rendered his profession of faith to be a false one, that he only pretended to believe but all the while remained dead in his sins. There are significant commentators who think that the second explanation is correct, that he was not a believer, because of the seriousness of the sin and the rebuke. But I tend to think the first explanation is more consistent with the words we read in verse 13, and I do take those words at face value. "Simon himself also believed." Sadly, but surely, it is not hard to recognize that, sometimes, believers say and do, horrible things, as did Simon. Yet that itself doesn't negate the reality of saving faith.

But whichever view of Simon you have, he is not the main focus of our text this morning. And we hear nothing more of him after verse 24. What is the focus of our text is the Holy Spirit. With plenty of questions that arise from what we read in,

v.14 "Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, 15 who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. 16 For as yet He had

fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit."

Those verses create all sorts of questions. What does it mean that those in Samaria who received the word did not yet have the holy spirit fall upon them? And, related to that, what does it mean, "They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus"? Lots of answers have been given to those questions by lots of different people, and, for some, the whole event is just plain weird and confusing. So what was going on in Samaria? What do these words mean and how to they apply to us.

Let me start to answer all those questions with a very broad explanation, emphasizing the transitional period of the apostolic age. The transition is from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, and while the essence of God's promise of redemption is not changed, the outward expression does change. Specifically, the gospel is now proclaimed to all the nations, not just the nation of Israel. That is, what Paul would later call, the mystery of the gospel.

Eph. 3:1 "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles— 2 if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, 3 how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, 4 by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), 5 which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: 6 that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel."

That is the reality of the New Testament church, differing in its identity from the Old Testament nation of Israel, that the "Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel." Ultimately, that means this,

Gal. 3:28 "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

The book of Acts narrates the transition from the Old Covenant to the New, and our text this morning is an example of that transition, a transition represented by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Thus my first point of emphasis is simply,

I. THE HOLY SPIRIT AND NEW COVENANT BELIEVERS.

In a sense, those in Samaria who received and believed the word of God were, outwardly, still Old Covenant believers. And the ministry of the apostles Peter and John in going to them was to complete their transition into the New Covenant experience. The evidence of that completed transition was, as we read in verse 17, when the Apostles "laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit."

Let me do something I often do, which is start my explanation by emphasizing what those words do NOT mean. I will seek to explain further what the do mean, but the starting point has to be to emphasize in terms of salvation, the Holy Spirit was already at work in their lives. As he was for all the Old Testament believers.

A. The saving work of the Holy Spirit is necessary for all true believers in every age.

Certainly that was true in the Old Testament, as it continues to be today. This is the very definition of salvation as Paul writes to Titus,

Titus 3:4 "But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, 5 not by works of righteousness

which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit."

Jesus himself says it plainly

John 3:5 "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

We read of that work of salvation in the Old Testament prophecy of Ezekiel, where God says…

Ezek. 36:24 "For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. 25 Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. 28 Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God."

So the saving work of the Holy Spirit is absolutely necessary for the salvation of any and every one of God's people. Including those we read about in Samaria who had already received the word of God unto salvation. So why, then, were Peter and John sent to them? My explanation is this, that the apostles went to complete the transition for those new believers in Samaria, the transition from their Old Covenant experience to the fullness of the New Covenant reality. And so,

B. The evidence of the Holy Spirit is a visible sign of salvation during the transition to the New Covenant church.

In a sense, this was their experience of Pentecost! Remember that great day, when the Spirit was poured out upon all the nations.

Acts 2:1 "When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. 2 And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."

I understand this visit of Peter and John to Samaria to have the same meaning and effect as that great day of Pentecost. A visible sign of the fullness of the transition to the New Covenant. And that which is most distinctive of the change is that the gospel is now for all the nations! Including the Samaritans, mentioned here in Acts 8. So now let me read those words again,

v.14 "…they sent Peter and John to them, 15 who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. 16 For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit."

The transition is made obvious by the act of baptism as well, here referred to as "baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus." I don't believe there is any reference there to a so-called "Jesus-only" baptism, contrary to the explicit formula of Matthew 28, "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," but I believe the reference to baptism reflects their true faith in Jesus. They had been baptized, but without the fullness of understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. And the

apostles ended that deficiency of understanding. Those believers were fully brought into the community of God's people in the New Covenant by the apostles.

v.17 "Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit."

Then we see Simon's response, his dreadful response. It is a response which expresses a very serious and dangerous error.

II. THE HOLY SPIRIT AND DANGEROUS ERRORS.
v.18-19

Clearly, the dangerous error is this,

A. Thinking that God's power is under the control of mankind.

Humanly speaking, it isn't difficult to understand Simon's thinking. He had been a sorcerer, a magician. That's all that he knew. That was his life, and though we read that he believed the word of God which was preached to him, he was still tempted by the experiences of all his past folly and deceptions. And he sinned grievously. He offered the apostles money! He tried to buy the same gift for himself, as if he could do that with money, which also tells you a little bit about his previous experiences as a magician. That was, apparently, all a matter of manipulation and worldly deception. It is hard to imagine that this would have been the first time he ever offered money for some gift or ability that he wanted. And I have to think about modern day psychics and palm readers with the same sort of cynicism.

How absolutely foolish this offer was, on two levels. First, that Peter and John would have the power within themselves to dispose this gift according to their own purpose and intentions. And second, that they would do so for a personal profit, for money. Again, this was so severe a sin that many commentators believe that it is impossible to view Simon as a believer at all, that the expression of his faith itself must have been a fraud, a selfish and hypocritical lie. But even if you don't agree with that, even if you think Simon's profession of faith was genuine, as I do, still, you cannot understate the egregious nature of this offense. He offered the apostles money in the foolish attempt to obtain this ability for himself, the ability to dispense the Holy Spirit by his own hands!

For a much more proper understanding of the Holy Spirit, we can turn to Jesus' own words,

John 3:5 "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Suffice it to say, God alone has power to govern and control the dispersion of his Holy Spirit.

Peter's rebuke then continues, further emphasizing the gravity of Simon's sinful request, further exposing the great danger of his error, and that is…

B. Failing to recognize the work of God's sovereign grace.

It wasn't just an offense against the nature of God's power, it was an offense to the revelation of God's grace. It wasn't just that Simon tried to purchase the power to dispense the Holy Spirit by offering money, but that that offer itself was a contradiction and denial of the very nature of God's grace itself. If you can purchase God's grace, or any manifestation of that grace, if you can buy it with money, they it isn't grace at all, is it?

Simon's totally missed the nature of God's grace. It is not for sale!

v.20 But Peter said to him, "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! 21 You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God."

Indeed, the true proclamation of the gospel is in these words,

Is. 55:1 "Ho! Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; And you who have no money, Come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk Without money and without price. 2 Why do you spend money for what is not bread, And your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, And let your soul delight itself in abundance. 3 Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live; And I will make an everlasting covenant with you—The sure mercies of David."

In the book of Revelation, Jesus says this,

Rev. 21:6 "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts."

Rev. 22:17 "And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely."

Simon missed all of that. He missed what was so crucial about the gospel, that it is offered freely to all who would believe. The gospel is proclaimed to the world as the gift of God's grace. And so these words describe our salvation,

Eph. 2:8 "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast."

Peter continues further in his rebuke to expose more of Simon's sin, demonstrating his ability as an apostle to know and understand Simon's heart, no doubt by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He speaks to the very depth of Simon's heart, calling him to repentance, for that which yet remained in his heart.

v.22 "Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. 23 For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity."

Peter understood that Simon's words were not merely naive or careless. It was not that Simon had simply misspoke, or somehow failed to understand fully or accurately the truth of the gospel. Rather, his offer to purchase the power to administer the Holy Spirit revealed something ultimately deadly within his own heart, and Peter expresses it just as pointedly as he possibly could.

v.23 "For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity."

In the gall of bitterness, as the ESV puts it. Overwhelmed, overcome with the poisonous effects that bitterness will bring.

We read of a grave warning about bitterness in,

Heb. 12:15 "…looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled."

Clearly Simon had become defiled by it. Peter is judging his heart, not only rebuking the sinfulness n of the outward action to offer money to Peter, but exposing what brought that about, the sinfulness of the heart. The bitterness of his heart. And the overwhelming power of that sinfulness, saying that Simon was "bound by iniquity." Bound by the corruption that remained within his heart, the sinful desires that yet needed to be put to death.

It's not hard to understand why some commentators thus judge Simon to be an unbeliever, so pointed and so intense is this rebuke. But then we read,

v.24 "Then Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me."

As with his earlier profession of faith, I take these words of Simon at face value, and see them as,

III. THE EVIDENCE OF SALVATION.

This text is all about salvation—salvation particularly to the people of Samaria. Not just the Old Covenant promise to the nation of Israel, but now the promise for all the nations, even the hated and despised half-breed people of Samaria. The Holy Spirit would come to them with the power of God unto salvation. And so it makes sense to recognize that salvation in Simon himself. For clearly, the evidence of salvation is…

A. Repentance.

Again, taking his words at face value, that is what we read,

v.24 Then Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me."

And though Simon's sin was great, these wise words in our Westminster Confession are appropriate, chapter 15:4, "As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent."

So I take that as great encouragement. I proclaim that to you as great encouragement. "As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent." And the declaration of the gospel includes this very exhortation of repentance.

Acts 2:38. "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

And speaking of the previous sins, these are also Peter's words,

Acts 3:17 "Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers. 18 But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. 19 Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, 20 and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before."

And so we see repentance here in Acts 8. We see the gospel coming to all the people of Samaria. And, as a conclusion to our text and as an introduction to all that follows ahead in the book of Acts, we see…

B. Preaching the gospel to the nations.

Luke adds verse 25 to conclude this whole account,

v.25 "So when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans."

So for all the questions that these verses raise for us, don't miss this great, main point. The gospel is being proclaimed, and God's people are being witnesses to him "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

So next week Philip heads south to Gaza, to the desert, where he meets a man from Ethiopia. And again, the gospel will be preached!