

Sermon on Acts 8:9-25 prepared by Jonathan Shradar

We are entering the third week of 2018 and by now if we had resolutions they have either become habit, or more likely, faded away with the party vibe of the holidays waning toward the routine. And I think this is the last week we can even mention resolutions... just becomes guilt from here on out!

This week I was thinking about resolutions as I studied our text for this morning. Not so much the keeping of resolutions but the desire behind them, the deeper goal of resolutions. Resolutions are all about gaining a new reality. We grow discontented with who we have become and we want to change the script.

This is usually a good thing when it comes to health or doing the next best thing... but our ability to change at the deepest level of who we are is weaker than we might imagine and our “reality” (circumstance, emotions, struggles) stays the same.

New Yorker cartoon, a man and woman on a beach sipping tropical drinks, “Oh no. We’re still us.”

This is the human condition and even when we can invest all of our energy into it we only make incremental changes to our reality.

But what if there was a truer, deeper and more lasting way of gaining a new reality? One not dependant on your ability but rather dependant on your weakness.

If you are a follower of Christ - someone who believes in Jesus and wants what he offers and calls you to, well you are participating in a new more meaningful reality and you are brought here to flourish by the very Spirit of God himself.

The Holy Spirit is freely given as the welcome into reality with Jesus and his power can’t be bought or manipulated.

Acts 8:9–25 “But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced 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. [12] But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. [13] Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

[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 baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. [17] Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. [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." [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." [24] And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

[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." (ESV)

Jesus has just used a couple of unlikely characters to reach a group of unlikely people, and there is tremendous hope for us in that. That we have been reached and would now be used to reach others. Persecution has propelled the church out of Jerusalem and all the believers that were scattered in Judea and Samaria go about preaching the word.

They don't stop talking about the new reality to be found in Christ. One such preacher is the servant Philip. Unknown, chosen to ensure widows were taken care of... he has come to the city of Samaria and is living the mission of Christ - healing and deliverance from oppression comes as signs pointing to and validating the message of Jesus.

Philip is following the mission of Christ - **Acts 1:8** "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." (ESV)

Emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit... new to Acts... vital to the mission of the church. The arrival of the Spirit becomes the evidence of entering into reality with Jesus. In our text we have new converts receiving the Spirit and an attempt to control the power of the Holy Spirit for personal gain... and by looking at these two instances, we might gain some insight and passion for the new reality Jesus has for us.

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1) Welcome into a new reality

Who is the Holy Spirit? There is much that we could spend hours unpacking in this text but we want to get to the keys for us today so some things will require going back to - small groups.

God is one in three persons. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The same in essence, varied in responsibility. Perfect in community. The Trinity. This is one of the more difficult truths to articulate. Every attempt to illustrate it comes up short and has the potential to lead into heresy! But it is a communicated reality in Scripture, even if the word is not used. The Father is called God, Jesus is called God, and the Holy Spirit is called god. Their unity is expressed from creation to the sending of the Spirit in the stories of Acts.

The Holy Spirit, not an afterthought or residue left in the wake of Christ's ministry, He is personal, and the power of God experienced in us.

Jesus says the Spirit is the paraclete, a helper to remain with us forever. The Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive. But for the believers, He dwells with you and is in you.

The Spirit teaches all things and brings to remembrance all that Jesus has said. He is peace. He is power to witness of Jesus.

In our study of Acts we have encountered the Holy Spirit as the animating generator of the church. From the babel-reversing moment of arrival, and giving voice to the gospel in many languages, to the earth-shaking boldness He grants to the church to go on preaching - the Spirit is integral, vital to the life of the church and the regeneration of hearts that they would believe in Jesus.

Since the upper room experience, the indwelling work of the Spirit has been the evidence of being part of Christ's new covenant reality. The defining question will become "have you received the Holy Spirit?"

And this account of the conversion of Samaritan believers begs the question of when does the Spirit come? This is where things get sticky... (jonathan@reservoirchurchsd.org!)

The right doctrinal stance of the church is that at belief in Christ you are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. There may be times of increased filling and empowering, but you are given the Spirit as a gift when you confess Jesus as Lord. In fact you are not capable of knowing Christ as Savior unless the Spirit has done a transforming work in the deepest part of who you are. So how the modern church often functions is inferring that the Spirit has come, if you are a believer.

But something else is afoot in Acts 8... really in the whole account of the early church. "Luke expects the receiving of the Holy Spirit (however we receive him) to be a real, identifiable experience of the living God, not just a logical inference from a human act of will." Piper

Experientially different. It doesn't have to all be signs - but it should be miraculous all the same - something is there that was not before. "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" becomes the defining question because it is noticeable... Luke would be uncomfortable, and we should be too, with the assumption of the indwelling of the Spirit.

On the other end of the spectrum is the abuse of this story to suggest that you are not fully-Christian unless there is a specific or spectacular manifestation of the Spirit.

Here there is believing, even baptizing but the Spirit seems delayed and it is not until the Apostles come and pray for the Samaritans that Spirit falls on them. So were they believers? Did Philip lack something in his preaching? Did the baptism miss a key element? (Sprinkling versus dunking!)

This is a unique situation - when the fullness of Christ is preached and people believe, we don't see things go down like this. There is an immediacy to the Spirit's reception so there is something happening that Luke doesn't report in any other story.

Now keep in mind who is converting here. These are the unlikely Samaritans. The people that have set up their own temple on Mt. Gerazim. They have made it their existence to be separate from Jewish patterns of worship and expression. But belief in Christ is a unifier. The walls of separation between groups of people are torn down.

The church had been exclusively Jews that believed in Jesus. The addition to the kingdom of this new people group is important - so much so that Apostles come to witness it - to pray for them. Some commentators think the Spirit worked this way to ensure the Samaritans were kept from striking out on their own as they had before. Some think it was more about confirming for the apostles that Jesus' call to make disciples of all peoples was true.

It seems appropriate to view this timing and work of the Spirit as a clear and defining welcome into this new reality that is faith in Jesus. They laid their hands on them and they received. Meaningful for the apostles, meaningful for the Samaritans, and meaningful for us because the kingdom is expanding, the Spirit is at work transforming those that are spiritually far off.

All Luke writes is that "they received the Holy Spirit." He doesn't add a specific physical or verbal evidence of that filling, he doesn't tell of flames, or a dove in the sky...

So how can we know we have received the Holy Spirit? Do the right people need to lay hands on me? Does the sun have to be setting on the horizon just right? Does there have to be music and fog drifting in?

Not if we continue to study how the Spirit arrives and works in the church as Luke records it.

"it is an experience of divine reality. It is not just an idea about our spiritual condition that we infer from a decision we have made. It is supernatural. You can use it to answer the question, "Did you receive the Spirit when you believed?"

You can say,

- Yes, I have seen the Spirit of obedience at work in my life subduing sin and inclining me to acts of love.

- Yes, I have seen the Spirit of praise in my life filling my heart and mouth with worship to Jesus and God the Father.
- Yes, I have seen the Spirit of courage at work in my life overcoming fear and giving me a will to risk things for the cause of Christ.
- And yes, even though I know that speaking in tongues and the gift of prophecy are no sure sign of God's grace, yet together with other evidences they too are a precious evidence that the power of God is on me.” Piper

If these things are true... hallelujah! If not, evaluate it... ask the Lord for it, that he would give you an increased outpouring of the Spirit and give you the eyes to recognize his work in you.

There is something else in this story. A shady character we can't miss and his actions tell us something of the pursuit of the Spirit.

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2) Freely Given

Simon the magic man... Reading this account you might think he was just some trickster that could draw a crowd. But there is a fair bit of historical evidence that Simon Magus was seen by many as a deity in his own right. “The power of the God that is called Great.” Some writings say he could levitate and fly at will...

Simon then is making his living and gaining influence over the people by magic before they hear of the work Christ... sleight of hand and who knows how darkly sourced power. He had amazed with his magic...

Enter Philip and Simon meets his match... the people turn their attention to this preaching that is confirmed with signs, healing, casting out of demons... Now Simon is amazed! And he “believes” and is baptized... continues with Philip, stays close.

What we have here is a case of looking at the wrong thing! Have you ever tried to get a toddler to notice something on the horizon? You point in the direction... but they don't see the thing. They instead stare at your fingers thinking that is what you wanted them to look at.

Well, Simon is staring at the fingers and missing what they point to. The signs, the healing, are meant to point to and reveal Christ. His power, his saving work and his hope. But Simon, amazed by the miracles, only sees them, believes in them. Not only does he miss the point, he tries to cash in on the power himself.

The object of his faith was the miraculous - not the finished work of Christ for forgiveness. He didn't desire to gain grace, he desired to gain more magic!

He witnesses the apostles lay hands on the people as they receive the Spirit and he wants in. He asks - give me this power to do this magic myself! By the response it seems he offered money for it...

Peter rebukes him. "May your money perish with you because you thought you could buy the Spirit." This isn't how God works and he won't be manipulated for your fame...

"He has no part or lot in this matter of Christianity. His heart is not right with God. He still needs to repent. He is still enslaved to bitterness and iniquity. He is still in his sin and not yet converted. This is confirmed by the entire tradition of the early church that says Simon went on to become a heretic and not a true Christian." Piper

Peter brings Simon back to the start, to repentance. Simon was amazed at Philip's signs - he doesn't own a brokenness for sin or humble trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior. The way to that, to reality with Jesus is repentance, turning from wickedness and seeking forgiveness in Christ, to be freed from his bondage.

Rather than do what Peter has warned... he still misses how things are meant to work and asks the apostle to pray instead. Friends, it doesn't matter who is praying for you, if you refuse to repent you will have no part in the kingdom of God.

We are okay with that... we know that, but do we recognize the other warning here? That the Spirit, just as salvation in Christ, is freely given. Not to be bought, or commoditized. Simon wished to spend a bit of coin to gain more power, to win back influence over the people... And we can fall into the same wrong thinking when we try to conjure up the Spirit for our own purpose or our own obsession with the "fingers meant to point to the prize" instead of the prize himself.

The Spirit works as he chooses for the glory of Christ. Every gift, every miracle, every manifestation is meant to point to Jesus and the reality we are in with him.

1 Corinthians 12:11 "All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills." (ESV)

Some of us are romantics. We like to set the mood in life - just the right soundtrack and candles with bring the magic! We do the same things in spiritual things but that is not how the Spirit works - you can't buy him - no "seed gift of \$1000" will bring his healing, no incantation with summon his filling... The HS is not a cobra in a basket to be tamed or motivated by your whistle.

And this is good news - because the Holy Spirit will not be thwarted by our silliness. He moves and Christ is glorified. We are transformed. The mission goes forth. We preach with boldness. Shilom comes to our city. And everything changes!

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This new reality is our home in Christ. Real, true life.

Be Welcomed - Christ, his life, death and resurrection for you, is a gift freely given. In his love, by nothing of your potential, or your effort. Revel in this gift. Let it be the driving motivation of your life.

I love that it is Peter praying and responding to Simon in this story. Peter has a story of being welcomed... called from a fishing boat to follow Jesus. He walks with him during his ministry and he speaks some pivotal truths along the way - and he also says some rather silly things (overly confident). Yet this is the man that denies Christ the night of his trial. And he carries the shame of that, and probably thinks of it any time a rooster crows. But Jesus didn't deny Peter, he didn't reject him. He restores him, and gives him the mission of feeding his sheep. Peter gives his life away to the glory of Christ - he is filled with the Spirit, preaches, mentors, welcomes other unlikely people into the family of Jesus. And he is martyred. Crucified like his savior, but claiming he was not worthy to die as Jesus had, he requests an inverted cross... All of his life, all of his energy... because Jesus was worth it.

In the same way as salvation, the Holy Spirit is freely given to those Jesus has claimed for himself. All of us are in a position for more of this reality. More of this power. More of this real life. A life that moves away from the typical to the Supernatural. Declare your faith to the Lord; ask for the release and outpouring of the Holy Spirit in your life; ask for the ability to discern his work.

Be Warned - The Spirit won't be bought off. His purpose is to empower the witness of Christ in our world. "Whether we preach or sing or act or write or heal, we are utterly and desperately dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit to straighten crooked hearts and cause people to look away from us to Jesus who alone can save." Stop your attempts to convince the Spirit to fall; Yield to his work and see where he will take you. To a newness unexplainable. To love, to peace we can't understand...

Acts 8:25 "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." (ESV)

In Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, not only is your destination different. Your reality is different. Regenerated. Gifted. Empowered.

Live this life.