

Jesus Reconciles Traditional Enemies

Acts of the Exalted Jesus Sermon Series

Acts 8:1-25

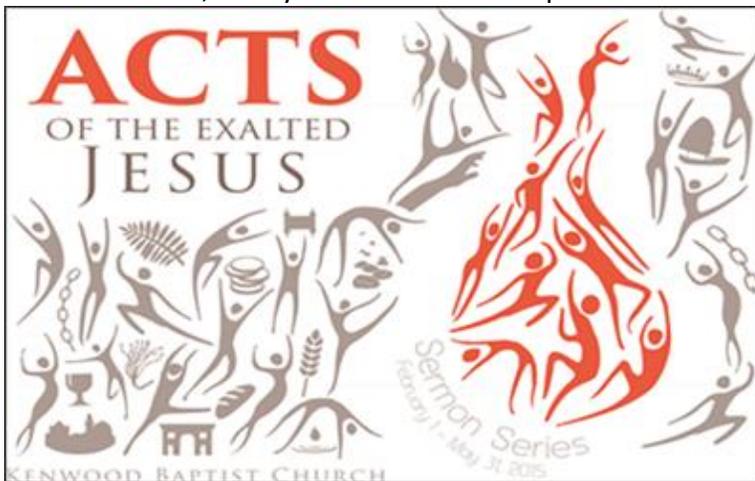
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

March 22, 2015

TEXT: Acts 8:1-25

This morning, as we continue in our series on the Acts of the Exalted Jesus, we look at the outcome of Stephen's sacrificial death. The outcome of this is a great persecution that scatters the believers, and yet Christ uses this persecution to extend the witness of Himself, crossing



over the cultural barrier of Samaria. We learn in this passage of the evangelization of Samaria. Without these verses, we would not know this chapter of church history; we would not know that Jesus words are true: *"You will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth"* (Acts 1:8). This chapter of church history tells us of Jesus' great power; it alerts us to the

deep spiritual needs of people around us; and it also warns us against being an imposter or pretending to follow Christ, as we will see. Let's look at this text carefully. It is full of challenge.

We read in Acts 8:1 that on the day that Stephen died:

"A great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria."

Luke takes care to tell us that all except the apostles were scattered, and I want to remind us at this point that as we go, Jesus Christ sends us. He scatters the people in this text, and yet there is a group of people that feel compelled from Christ to stay at their post. We need obedience either way. For some of us, Jesus will send us out into new places; others He will give a deep conviction that we are to be God's man or God's woman at a particular post. A dear pastor friend of mine, who is serving in a difficult part of the world right now, said that though there are economic troubles, though the society is in chaos around him, he feels called to be at his post. His wife told me with tears in her eyes that he would be the last one to leave. He said bad

times for the world are often good times for the Gospel, so don't abandon your post. But if Christ scatters you, then do what we see happening in Acts 8:2-3:

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

There is great lament and mourning for Stephen; a public burial, visible mourning. The Christians do not hide their grief over the loss of Stephen, and yet in opposite mode of action, we read that Saul, whom we will meet and love later as the apostle Paul, this Saul began to ravage the church. He went from house to house, dragging men and women from their homes, placing them in prison. There's an intensification of persecution, a grim portrait of Saul prior to being confronted by Christ, and we need this portion of the story of this persecutor, who will one day become a great apostle. Those who are scattered preach the Word wherever they go, and Luke's burden in this chapter is to tell us one part of that story, the evangelization of Samaria. He focuses our attention on Philip who goes to Samaria and preaches Christ there. There is no other Gospel than Jesus Christ. As Philip goes to Samaria, it's Christ that he proclaims.

Samaria is a beautiful place. It's a hill country; it's lush as we see in this picture, and as he travels toward Samaria, he takes a road that is lined with columns, many of which are still standing. Six hundred columns lined the main road to Samaria. Philip travels this road, and we read that he goes to the city of Samaria, not just to the district, but to the main city. The main city of Samaria was called *Sebaste*, named in Greek for Augustus. Caesar Augustus had given this



area to Herod the Great, and Herod the Great rebuilt the city in honor of Caesar as patron, naming the city after him. Below are the ruins of the *Augusteum*, the temple built to honor Caesar Augustus. Other ruins of the city reflect its pagan

character: ruins of a theater, ruins of athletic stadiums, ruins of a forum and places to worship



other gods. The city was lined and surrounded with an impressive wall and imposing towers. Samaria was an 'other' kind of place: a place forbidden for devout Israelites to even go; a place of deep animosity and cultural conflict that we read about in the Bible itself; a mixed population; traditional enemies. And yet, Christ calls us to go to and to share the Word with this 'other.' It replays the incarnation of Jesus to do cross-cultural missions. It's precisely the power of Jesus Christ that reaches through us to people

who are unlike us. We are tempted to reach people who are like us. We are tempted to stay in places in which we are comfortable, and yet the compelling Spirit of Jesus says: "You will be My witnesses, not only here, but there, and to the uttermost limits of the earth."

Jesus Himself began the mission to Samaria in John 4. Even within the Samaritan traditions, they had the expectation of a coming Redeemer. Philip goes, he preaches Christ, and Luke tells us in Acts 8:6:

"When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said."

I love this expression. We live in a distracted world; we live in a world where people are consuming gigabytes of mostly meaningless information, and it's hard to secure attention on things that matter, really matter. These people paid attention to Philip, not because he had a more sophisticated presentation; they paid attention to Philip, not because he was able to dazzle them with his rhetorical skills; they paid attention to him because they had a real spiritual need, and Philip had the solution for it. As he proclaimed Christ, the people were riveted because their spiritual need was both aroused and solved through the preaching of Jesus Christ. We read in Acts 8:7:

"With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed."

People's lives who were broken become whole; people who were oppressed by demonic power were set free. Do you believe that Jesus Christ sets people free, that He heals them and restores? One of the great understatements of the New Testament is in Luke 8:8 where he tells us:

"So there was great joy in that city."

This is the joy of being set free; this is the joy of discovering your sins are forgiven; this is the joy of being healed and set free. This is the continuation of the ministry of Jesus who looked out on the crowds with compassion, for they were afflicted. When you look around at the lives around you, do not judge lives that are out of control and chaotic. What do we really expect them to be without Christ? Look at those lives with compassion, the compassion of Jesus Christ and say: "Here is the solution for broken lives; here is the solution for people oppressed and afflicted."

I met Dr. Adam Reed a couple of weeks ago through the Perspectives Course, and he said: "What kind of a doctor would I be if I met someone with a stage IV cancer diagnosis and I did not tell them?" He said: "What kind of a doctor would I be if I knew that they had a stage IV cancer diagnosis and I knew a gifted physician who developed a treatment protocol that would bring healing to that life and had never lost a person? What kind of a doctor would I be if I kept that information to myself?" We who know Christ as the remedy for a sin-sick soul. We need to recover a sense of boldness in sharing Christ with the people around us. We are guilty of keeping this to ourselves, as though Christ came just for us. God promised to Abraham in Genesis that he would have descendants like the stars, and every family on earth would be blessed in him.

We come in closer to the situation in Samaria, and it gets very real and specific with the introduction of a man named Simon, who is one of the most distressing characters of the New Testament. Simon is introduced to us as a man who practiced sorcery. We read in Luke 8:9:

"Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria."

He was a magician, and he was so strong in his exercise of magic that he amazed and astonished the people of his entire region, and boasted that he was someone great. We read in Luke 8:10:

"All the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, 'This man is rightly called the Great Power of God.'"

That's a sobering title to give to any man. He secured their attention, and they followed him because he amazed them for a long time with the practice of magic. We have many examples preserved from antiquity of papyrus excerpts of the magician's craft, and I've pored over many of these this week. I wanted to give you a sense of Simon's craft. Simon's craft is to practice magic for a fee, to read signs, interpret omens, provide spiritual services. One spell is a spell for revelation and insight. It begins with the incantation: "Hail, Althabot Hail, Althonai, . . . Let them arise, enter, and give answer to me concerning the matter about which I ask." This is an incantation to reveal a secret. Another spell or magic practice is for driving out demons: "Bring Yao Sabaoth unto me; may your power issue forth until you drive away this unclean demon. I

adjure you, demon, whoever you are, by this name, Sabarbarbathioth Sabarbarathiouth Sababarbathioneht Sabarbarbaphai,” and it goes on and on. This incantation comes with the difficult practice of taking olive branches, seven of them, and binding them together as in a whip and beating yourself as you pray this incantation. Another magical service, like this one, is for the very practical need of becoming invisible for a day. Some of you are thinking: “I could really make use of this; I love solitude.” This isn’t for solitude; it’s for the cloak of secrecy to do whatever you wish for a day, which is usually not a good thing for unredeemed people. It begins with a similar type of incantation and concludes: “Make me invisible in the presence of any man until sunset.” It also comes with the sympathetic magic practice of taking a ball of dung and mixing it with oil of unripe olives into a dark paste and pasting on yourself beforehand. There’s another one, for a nominal fee, to secure the love of a woman. This one was called *the sword* because it was so effective, they said, and it concludes: “Turn her soul to me so that she may love me, so that she may feel passion for me, so that she may give me what is in her power.” My favorite this week was the calling down of a curse to win a horse race: “I invoke you by the great names so that you will bind every limb and every sinew of Victorious -- the charioteer of the blue team and of his horses which he is about to race. Bind their legs, their onrush, their bounding, and their running; blind their eyes so that they cannot see; and twist their soul and heart so that they cannot breathe, so that they may not reach to victory tomorrow in the circus. Now, now, quickly, quickly.”

Some people in our country wish there was a curse to defeat their rival team. Obviously, this man wasn't betting on the blue team. But you know, as strange as this seems to us, it is critical to remember that the practice of magic, sorcery, consulting the stars, astrology, reading omens, or palms, are forbidden to God's people. They are forbidden to us for a critical reason. They are forbidden to us because we believe in a living God who speaks from heaven, and that power in this life does not come through incantations. Power in this life comes from a filling of the Holy Spirit and a walking in faithfulness to God. All forms of idolatry, seeking to manipulate the heavens, are ways in which we as the creature seek to manipulate the Creator. In fact, the Creator has authority over our lives, and He does not ask us to interpret signs. He does not ask us to look at tea leaves. He does not ask us to look at our palms. He asked us to look directly to Him and pray to Him and read His Word. He says: “I am a God who dwells in light, and I do not speak in darkness.” These practices are forbidden to all who know Jesus Christ.

When Philip preached the Name of Jesus and proclaimed the Good News of the Kingdom, there was a power encounter, and the people of Samaria who had been astonished by Simon’s magic arts for years believed in a superior Power, that of Jesus Christ, the truly great Name, the Name of Jesus. They believed and were baptized. Simon saw this, and we read, at first hopefully, that he believes and is baptized, and yet caution immediately arises. We are not told that he

followed Christ. We are told that he began to follow around behind Philip, and that he was astonished at the deeds that were done through Philip. He who astonished others is now astonished by the power that is moving through Philip. God in His grace and kindness to these new Samaritan believers sends word back to Jerusalem. The apostles hear the remarkable news that Samaria has received the Word of God: "Our ancestral enemies have received the Word of Jesus Christ and believed." They send an embassy of church leaders from Jerusalem to come to pray for them. They do not treat the Samaritans from a distance and say: "Great, you believe. Go your separate way." No, they send an official delegation to pray and receive them as brothers in Christ, and God delays the pouring out of the Spirit until this official recognition. It is not what He usually does, but in this case it is critical because it shows that the Samaritans are not enemies any longer. They are not a sectarian group; they are brothers in Christ, and the apostles embrace them. But Simon, when he saw that when the apostles laid their hands on people they receive the Holy Spirit, an evil desire arose with him, and he offers money for spiritual power. That's his trade; that's his life; that's what he has been living for years. He who received fees is now ready to give fees. "How much does it cost for the power of the Holy Spirit? I'll pay; just give me this ability so everyone on whom I lay my hands will receive the Spirit." Peter sees through this imposter. With sober words he says in Luke 8:20:

"May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money!"

The Greek text says: "Your silver with you, may it go to hell." This is strong language. He says: "You thought you could buy the free gift of God." You see, Jesus has bought us with His blood, and we do not buy Him or His grace or favor. Peter says in Acts 8:21:

"You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God."

Peter then urges Simon in Acts 8:22, to pray two imperatives before it's too late, eternity in the balance:

"Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that He may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart."

Peter, by the power of the Holy Spirit, sees into him and says in Acts 8:23:

"I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."

Simon's spiritual state is dark, and he is bound in unrighteousness. His heart is filled with gall, and we long, oh, I long, reading this text carefully, for the next verse to be something like: "and Simon repented and fell on his face before Christ and said, 'Oh Jesus, great and mighty saving Son of God, forgive me for ever such a thought.'" I long to see the next verse say: "and Simon hurled his papyri into the fire and said, 'Banish that I would ever partake in such things again, and I give my heart wholeheartedly to serving Him and doing whatever He might ask of me.'"

That's what we long to see, but the heartbreaking reality is that that is not what the next verse says. Peter asks two things: repent and pray, and Simon does neither. He does not repent. Instead, the magician knows the magician's world. Threatened with destruction, he asks for an incantation for himself. He refuses to repent; he refuses to pray; but he says in Acts 8:24:

"Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me."

"You pray for me." That which he is asked as the *sine qua non* of discipleship, he cannot do. Would that it were otherwise. This is the last we hear of Simon in the New Testament. We never hear of his repentance, though we wish it were so. In reality, we do have an abundance of testimony from early Christians in the generations right after this about Simon. Justin Martyr was from Samaria, and if he had known differently, he would have said so. Instead, he narrates about Simon the magician the deep the account that we have in Acts. He summarizes it and then he tells us what happened after this. He says in Chapter XXIII of *Doctrines and Practices of Simon Magus and Meander*:

"This Simon, then, not putting faith in God a whit the more, set himself eagerly to contend against the apostles, in order that he himself might seem to be a wonderful being, and applied himself with still greater zeal to the study of the whole magic art, that he might the better bewilder and overpower multitudes of men. Such was his procedure in the reign of Claudius. . . This man, then, was glorified by many as if he were a god; and he taught that it was he himself who appeared among the Jews as the Son of God and descended into Samaria as the Father and came to other nations in the character of the Holy Spirit."

What kind of man would teach that, that I'm the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit? He represented himself as being the loftiest of powers, the being over all.

Hippolytus of Rome said that Simon came eventually from Samaria to Rome and attacked the apostles with his teaching. The apostle Peter opposed him on many occasions. Hippolytus goes on to say:

"When [Simon] was on the point of being shown up, he said, in order to gain time, that if he were buried alive he would rise again on the third day."

What kind of a man says that?

Epiphanius, another early Christian leader, says he founded a sect and called them the *Simonians*. They were characterized by their immorality and practice of magic, and he went from bad to worse.

Eusebius of Caesarea writes later that Simon was the author of all the early heresies. There is not a shred of evidence in the New Testament or any early Christian writings to suggest that he ever repented. This stands as a strong warning. We don't know from the New Testament what

ultimately happens to Simon. What we do know is what Luke urges us to know at the conclusion of this text in Acts 8:25:

“After they had further proclaimed the Word of the Lord and testified about Jesus, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.”

They, plural, – the other Samaritan Christians, Peter, John, Philip, and the others, – they proclaimed the Word of the Lord, and they testified about Jesus. What they did was, they continued from the city of Sebaste into many Samaritan villages, preaching the Gospel, and they went from good to great. This is all we know about the Word of God extending in Samaria. Praise God, in heaven we will see a great number of Samaritans worshiping around the Lamb who was slain.

Let me apply this to us in four ways. Remember John Owen’s line: “I always preach the text to myself before I preach it to my people.” I want you to know that I’ve preached these four points to David Palmer before preaching them to you. I’ve been stirred by this passage in these four ways.

Number one: **Be bold in sharing Christ wherever He sends you.** Can we embrace this is a community? Can we grow in boldness in sharing Jesus Christ wherever He sends us? If He scatters you, share Him there. If he says, “You stay here and man this post,” He has you there for a reason, to share Him.

Number two: **People are in real bondage without Him.** Can we deepen our compassion that people around us are in real bondage without Christ? Sometimes we judge people, look down on how they seem to be living. I think this grieves the heart of the Lord. Instead, we should have a wellspring of compassion. People are oppressed with evil; people are living broken lives; and they need the remedy, who is Christ. The remedy is not medication; the remedy is not techniques or wishful thinking. The remedy is faith in a Person, a Savior, in Jesus Christ who heals the sin-sick soul.

Number three: **Keep yourselves holy to the Lord and free from anything that comes close to these kinds of spiritual practices.** Keep yourselves free from anything that's close to spiritism, or astrology, or interpreting the signs, or reading palms, or consulting the horoscope, or any of these things we must remain far from as God's holy people. This kind of thing is around us. There is a huge society of it in Cincinnati. I don't know the details of everyone's life in this area, but we must be reminded from this text that God's people do not consult these things. God's people are reserved for His use in the world. We have a holy God who speaks to us in His Word, and if you need guidance, if you need direction, go straight to the throne of mercy and open the pages of His Word. He says in Isaiah 45:18-19:

“I am the LORD, and there is no other. I have not spoken in secret, from somewhere in a land of darkness.”

Number four: Beware of anything less than full surrender to Jesus. Simon's belief and baptism turns out to be a fraud because he wants to stay where he is and just incorporate Jesus into his arsenal. He just wants to incorporate Jesus into his bag of tricks, with no transformation. Beware of anything less than a full surrender to Jesus. When we do that, He will fill us with the Holy Spirit, and He will dwell with us, and He will move through us, and He will cause His Name to be known and loved around us. It is our charge to be found as men and women who are in Christ alone. Would you stand with me to pray and prepare to sing?

Lord Jesus, we exalt You together. Holy Son of God, You are our light, our strength, our song, our solid ground. Lord Jesus, You are the One who purchased our lives, and we need not offer anything to purchase Your forgiveness. Hallelujah, Lord! May we be found in Christ alone this morning. Forgive us, Lord, we asked right now, for hiding our faith in You. Forgive us for judging lives around us who desperately need You. Forgive us, Lord, where we have courted the wrong kind of spiritual power and adulterated our hearts. Forgive us, Lord, for offering anything less than a full surrender to You. Would You breathe on us now Your precious Holy Spirit that we might live in faithfulness and be found in Christ alone,

In Jesus' matchless Name we pray, Amen.