



# THE MARKS OF AUTHENTICITY

SERIES: *THE SPREADING FLAME*

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Acts 8:1-24

Twelfth Message

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We return this morning to our studies in the book of Acts. This book opens with Christ's final words to his disciples, containing his remarkable blueprint for world evangelization: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (1:8). Up to this point, the gospel had been restricted to Jerusalem, where the apostles and all the believers remained. The first seven chapters of Acts tell the story of the growth of the church in the city. The church might well have remained in Jerusalem had it not been for the death of Stephen and the intense persecution that followed.

The opening verses of chapter 8 describe the events that followed Stephen's death.

**Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison. Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. (Acts 8:1-4, NASB)**

Our text begins with persecution and ends with preaching. The church in Jerusalem was quite comfortable. It had all the amenities. The apostles taught there; they had a great fellowship of believers; and they were having a tremendous impact upon the city. We probably would have enjoyed that church very much and found it hard to leave. God had to drive the believers out of the city.

The theological motivation for their departure came as a result of Stephen's message, recorded in chapter 7, which laid the theological foundation for the preaching of the gospel to the gentiles. But it was Saul's persecution that was the actual reason they were forced out. Stephen's preaching was like a goad to Saul's tortured conscience. Reacting to that guilt, Saul began to brutally persecute the churches. The word ravage suggests sadistic cruelty. It could be used of a wild boar tearing a victim's body apart. Not only did Saul not spare the women, we know from his own testimony later that he wasn't satisfied with imprisoning them; he continued until they were put to death.

Saul's behavior is a reminder that things are not always what they seem. People often oppose the gospel because they are fighting against something deeply rooted in their spirit. They know that the gospel is true, and they are simply reacting against it. Certainly that was true of Saul of Tarsus, who later became the apostle Paul. Saul was the relentless hunter who inflicted death and misery on the young church.

Yet God used Saul's rage to accomplish two wonderful purposes. The gospel invaded Samaria, fulfilling the second step in Christ's blueprint, and it went forth with amazing spiritual power, just as Christ had also promised. Verse 4: "those who had been scattered went about preaching the word." Notice that the scattered were not apostles but ordinary Christians who nevertheless had gifts of the Spirit. Those gifts might have gone unused had God not used pressure to place these believers in circumstances where they were forced to use them. The scattering would create a band of missionaries rather than refugees.

Maybe that is true of some of you. You find yourself scattered because of a job transfer, your pursuit of an education, or some family concern. Wherever God scatters you, sow seeds of his love and grace there, and share the good news. Put down roots wherever you are planted and bear fruit for Jesus Christ. The word "preached" is misleading. The Greek term merely implies that these scattered believers simply shared the good news about Jesus, evangelizing wherever they went.

Following this general description of the scattering process, Luke becomes more specific. He uses one example, Philip, from this group of Hellenistic Jews who left Jerusalem and began to preach in other parts of the world.

**Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. So there was much rejoicing in that city. (8:5-8)**

Luke states the case so matter of factly that it is easy to miss the significance of the statement that "Philip went down to the city of Samaria." Up to this point,

Jews had had no dealings with Samaritans. They hated the Samaritans, actually, regarding them as outcasts and half-breeds. These people would have nothing to do with each another. The schism between them had a long history. It went all the way back to the period of the monarchy. After Solomon's reign, they actually divided into two separate kingdoms. Samaria became the capital of the Northern kingdom and Jerusalem the capital of the Southern kingdom.

During the exile, these two kingdoms were further divided. The Assyrian kings deported large numbers of people from the north and repopulated the land with foreigners, who intermarried with the remaining Jews. They established a rival worship center close to Samaria, on Mt. Gerazim, and carried on their own worship. They accepted the first five books of the Bible but rejected the prophets. From Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman (John 4), we know that they were looking forward to a Messiah. The Jews in the south regarded them as heretics and would have nothing to do with them. Upon conquering Palestine, the Romans set up two separate provinces, Judea and Samaria, a separation that was complete by the time of Jesus and the apostles. These people wanted no part of each other. They would go out of their way to avoid contact.

To get from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north, one had to pass through Samaria, which was right in the middle, the part of Israel that we call the West Bank today. Although the most direct route from Judea to Galilee went straight through Samaria, a Jew traveling from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north would cross the Jordan to the east side of the river, make his way into Perea, go up the Jordan Valley, and then travel west into Galilee. He would go miles out of his way to avoid all contact with Samaritans, although it was twice the distance of the more direct route. For Philip to go to Samaria would be like Israel today sending missionaries to the P.L.O. It was a bold move.

That deep-rooted prejudice makes our Lord's encounter with the Samaritan woman even more striking. Jesus left Judea for Galilee, traveling through Samaria. He didn't have to go that way, but he wasn't a racist. In the brief encounter by a well he offered water to a thirsty, hurting woman and brought life to that Samaritan village. He knew the hunger in the hearts of those people. Though they were not Jews they still were looking for a Messiah. They were theologically inaccurate, and culturally different, but what bound them together with every race was a great hunger for God. They were looking for something.

This is what we need to recapture as believers. The gospel breaks through all our cultural differences, because everyone has a need. You can assume that. Often it is covered up and not seen by us or even recognized by them, but the need is there. That is why I am so excited about our new Alpha course. I would like to ask everyone to pray about inviting someone to the opening dinner on January 23rd.

Luke says that Philip discovered that same hunger in Samaria as Jesus had. Philip proclaimed the Messiah to the Samaritans and found a great hunger for God. The crowds gave close attention to his words. Philip was a layman, not an apostle. He is the only person in the Scriptures to be called an evangelist. We sometimes think of evangelists as professionals like Billy Graham. Certainly there are many in pastoral ministry who have gifts of evangelism, but it has been my experience that the most effective evangelists are lay people.

Philip was a layman, a refugee in a hostile environment, but he was filled with the love of Christ. Once in Samaria, he simply proclaimed Christ, declaring the good news of the grace of God. Soon he had a revival on his hands. Luke records that signs accompanied the proclamation of the gospel. These were similar to the confirmatory signs that accompanied the proclaiming of the gospel by the apostles. These Samaritans, like the Jews in Jerusalem, were looking for the marks of the Messianic Age. Signs like casting out demons and healing the lame validated the spoken word. The result was that "there was much rejoicing in that city." Isn't that a great word? Our cities today are filled with misery, but wherever the gospel is preached it produces great joy! That is what happened in Samaria. And it can happen in Cupertino, Sunnyvale, Los Altos and San Jose.

Before Philip arrived in Samaria the city had been influenced by a much different power.

**Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, "This man is what is called the Great Power of God." And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike. Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed. (8:9-13)**

We actually know a good deal about Simon from some of the early writers of the church, men like Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, who were disciples of the apostles. They refer to him as Simon Magus, which means Simon the magician. But this man was not an illusionist. He was a practitioner of the occult. The miracles he performed were real, but demonic. And he held tremendous sway over the city. Some historians believe that he claimed to be God. The Samaritans, intoxicated by his charisma and supernatural power, exalted and followed him. I picture him wearing beautiful robes and making grand theatrical entrances wherever he went. He loved attention and exaltation.

Simon was a man of great power, but when Philip arrived, he felt that power being challenged. People were responding to the truth, and Simon lost his followers as a result. He probably thought, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em!" Fascinated by what was happening, he made a public profession of faith and was baptized. But as we will see in a moment, his faith was not genuine. What amazed Simon was not the love and grace of God, but the power. That's what he wanted. He said and did the right things, but his heart was unchanged.

Luke continues his story about Simon by sharing another display of apostolic power, which came through Peter and John.

**Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. (8:14-17)**

This passage has confused many. Some have implied from it that the baptism of the Spirit is a phenomenon that is subsequent to salvation. They say that Christian conversion is a two-stage experience. One becomes a believer, and at some later point is given the Holy Spirit. But it is always dangerous to isolate any verse or passage of Scripture. We have to learn to interpret Scripture by Scripture, text by context, each part in light of the whole, the narrative portions in light of the didactic sections. We should always ask ourselves what is the general teaching of Scripture on any given subject.

On this matter of the receiving of the Spirit, the general teaching of Scripture is clear. Entrance into the Christian life is a single-stage experience. We call it conversion; God calls it regeneration. God puts new life into us and we become new creatures in Christ. At that point we receive from God both the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Following this initiation we grow into Christian maturity, and in this process of growth there will certainly be many deeper, richer, fuller experiences of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So this experience of the Samaritans is not the norm; it is quite exceptional. When we ask why God would withhold the Spirit, we come back again to this great division between Jews and Samaritans that had lasted for centuries. This was a critical moment in salvation history. The Samaritans were being evangelized and were responding to the gospel. It was a moment of great joy, but also one fraught with danger. What would happen now? Would the schism continue? The gospel had been welcomed by the Samaritans, but would the Samaritans be welcomed by the Jews?

If God had not withheld his Spirit until the Jerusalem apostles arrived, it is possible that both groups could have found Christ without finding each other. This was the Samaritans' Pentecost. There had to be a delay for

the apostles to come up to Samaria and confirm what had occurred. When they arrived, they found everything as it had been described. The believers were genuine, except for the fact that they had not received the Spirit. So the apostles laid hands on them and they received the Spirit. This apostolic bestowal confirmed that the Samaritans were not second class believers. They were a part of the church in Jerusalem, not a separate church. What had occurred in Jerusalem happened to them also. The apostles, the foundation stones of the church, were their foundation stones as well. This helped them realize that they but one body. So this is not an indication that the gift of the Holy Spirit is an act subsequent to salvation.

Luke inserts a paragraph here to reveal something of Simon's nature.

**Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity." But Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me." (8:18-24)**

To Simon, this was an irresistible display of power – his drug of choice. He had spent his whole life scheming his way to the top. He wanted that power! These men laid hands on others and certain life-changing things occurred. That's what Simon wanted, so he offered them money. This is the origin of the term simony, which is the practice of religion for the sake of money. Simon was the first of that group. He took out his wallet and said, "I want that secret. Name your price!"

Peter's response to Simon was direct and firm. The NASB translates this phrase in a polite manner, "May your silver perish with you." Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, has a more literal translation: "To hell with you and your money!" It's a serious thing to think that God's power can be bought with money. Peter then pointed out the source of the problem, saying, "your heart is not right with God." Simon's heart was crooked. Peter saw right through him. This man had never given his heart to Christ. Peter exhorts him to repent, but Simon's response is lacking. He failed to show any sign of repentance or even contrition. Instead of praying for forgiveness, as Peter has urged him to do, he asked the apostle to pray for him instead. What really concerned Simon was not that he might receive God's pardon, but that he might escape God's judgment. From the writings of the early church we know that Simon

never changed. He never did give his heart to the Lord. He continued to call himself "Simon the great one." He is portrayed in history as an enemy of the church.

Throughout this book, Luke has been describing various attacks used by the devil to destroy the church. The first attack was outward—persecution and physical attack. But the devil's most powerful attack upon the church by far is inward assault through various means: hypocrisy, as with Ananias and Sapphira; division, as with the widows; and here a third form of inward attack, that of heresy, involving those who call themselves Christians but who do not believe what Christ taught or submit themselves to the apostles' teaching. That was Simon. No wonder this man became one of the earliest opponents of the gospel. Historians record that he hindered the gospel wherever it went. He traveled all over the ancient world establishing cult centers in his name and authoring all kinds of heresies.

As we think about how this story relates to us, we are struck by the contrast between Simon and Philip. What are the marks of authenticity in someone's life or ministry? How can we spot a heretic? And how can we guard ourselves against falling into heresy? Through the contrast may seem simple and obvious, the implications are profound. The difference between these two, Philip and Simon, is that Phillip exalted Christ while Simon exalted himself.

This has always a problem in the church. The apostle John refers to Diotrophes, who loved to have the preeminence. Throughout the history of the church many have claimed to have the inside track on the truth. They think they are the only ones who can interpret Scripture accurately. They write books to shed light on the Scripture, but they always twist the apostolic message. When we see someone exalting himself rather than Jesus Christ, we need to pay attention. A television news show last week exposed one of the leading televangelists. They were trying to determine where all the millions of dollar go that this man brings in. I was deeply saddened as the story revealed a pattern of arrogance and greed. This man looked much more like Simon than Philip.

But, as I think about how this text applies to me, I need to remember that whenever I begin to exalt myself I am taking the first step on a road that leads to heresy. It is pride, not confusion over the meaning of the Scriptures, that leads to heresy. The key to understanding Scripture is having a humble attitude.

In recent weeks I have been struck again by John the Baptist's word about Jesus, "He must increase, I must decrease." That is what I want for my life as we enter the New Year. I have spent the majority of my years thinking that life was all about me. But it isn't. It is about Christ. He is not committed to make my life happy or successful. He is committed to the exaltation of his Son in the world and in the lives of believers.

I want to close sharing a prayer, *The Litany of Humility*, by Cardinal Merry del Val, from a Catholic prayer book. I have framed this and put it over my desk. It speaks volumes to me.

*From the desire of being esteemed,  
From the desire of being loved,  
From the desire of being extolled,  
From the desire of being honored,  
From the desire of being praised,  
From the desire of being preferred to others,  
From the desire of being consulted,  
From the desire of being approved;  
From the fear of being humiliated,  
From the fear of being despised,  
From the fear of suffering rebuke,  
From the fear of being falsely accused,  
From the fear of being forgotten,  
From the fear of being ridiculed,  
From the fear of being wronged,  
From the fear of being suspected;  
Deliver me, Jesus,  
That others may be loved more than I,  
That others may be esteemed more than I,  
That in the opinion of the world  
others may increase and I may decrease,  
That others may be chosen and I set aside,  
That others may be praised and I unnoticed,  
That others may be preferred before me in everything,  
That others become holier than I,  
provided that I may become as holy as I should.  
Jesus grant me the grace to desire it.*

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