

A Better Power (Part 1)

Acts 8:9-25 a

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Introduction

Last week we looked at how persecution broke out against the church.

- Up until the time of Stephen's death, the Jewish leaders had opposed the apostles and their doctrine.
 - They had been restrained for two reasons, under the providence of God...
 - First, they were restrained by the fact that the apostles and the disciples as a whole had won the favour and admiration of the people. The leaders were afraid they would be opposed if they were to initiate persecution.
 - Second, they were restrained by the advice of Gamaliel, a well respected Pharisee who had persuaded them to refrain from stoning Peter and John. His advice brought in several years of peace for the fledgling church.
 - God did this in order that the church might become established.
- But with Stephen, opposition had arisen against the whole church that was no longer confined to the leaders alone.
 - At least among the Hellenists, there was widespread opposition to Stephen and his doctrine.
 - One man, in particular, was instrumental in initiating and maintaining the persecution—Saul of Tarsus!
 - Under his leadership, a great persecution had arisen such that the whole church was scattered.

We saw that under this persecution, there were some who stayed and some who fled.

- We saw that the apostles had remained at Jerusalem...
 - It was important to maintain the foundation of the church that had been established there.
 - It also appears that the persecution, being among the Hellenists, was not so much targeted against them...
 - Perhaps this was in part because the apostles were not educated men and so not seen as much of a threat by the proud Saul of Tarsus who was a man of many letters.
 - Whatever the case, the Apostles boldly stayed on at Jerusalem, leading the church and caring for it.
- But we saw that others fled...
 - There was no wrong in their fleeing,

- The wrong would have been in denying their faith to avoid persecution.
- It was not an easy thing to leave their possessions and jobs behind, but that is what they did rather than deny Christ.
- They did not become silent saints.
 - We see that far from doing that, they told everyone about Jesus, wherever they went.
 - As a result, many came to know the Saviour through their witness.
 - Their suffering led to joy for all those who found Jesus!
 - This was even true of the Samaritans!
 - In particular, Luke focuses on a place in Samaria where there was a lot of demonic activity—many were possessed and many followed a sorcerer whose name was Simon.

And that brings us to our subject for this week!

- This week, I want to show you how the kingdom of God came with power to Samaria!

The Samaritans were the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,

- but through their unfaithfulness to the covenant, they had brought many sorrows upon themselves.
 - In the days of Solomon's son, they had broken away from God's appointed worship at Jerusalem and set up idols at Dan and Bethel (not Dan and Beersheba as I mistakenly said last week).
 - Years of apostasy followed until at last the Lord delivered them into the hands of Assyria in 722 BC.
 - The Assyrians removed the leading families from the land and brought in foreigners from other conquered people resulting in intermarriages.
 - After the return of the Jews from Babylon, the Samaritans were not permitted to assist with the rebuilding of the temple at Jerusalem,
 - And ended up setting up a rival temple which was later destroyed by the Jews when they conquered them a little over a century before Christ.
 - The Romans had them come on the scene and had given the Samaritans independence in 63 BC.
 - Strong animosity prevailed between the Jews and the Samaritans.

The Lord Himself had forbidden His disciples to minister to the Samaritans during the days of His earthly ministry,

- But He had rescinded that prohibition after His resurrection and said:
 - **Acts 1:8: You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."**
- And now, with the persecution that came with Stephen,

- the time had come in the providence of God for the subduing power of King Jesus to break forth into Samaria!

TRANS> As we move into this passage, I want to begin with a general observation...

I. Human beings, living in this fallen world, long for power.

- Of course we do!

A. By the fall, we are in a pitiful and desperate condition!

- Sin has alienated us from our Maker and taken away the dominion that we were given at creation.
 - The very earth that we were given dominion over now swallows us up and returns us to dust.
 - This is the ultimate humiliation.
 - Our weakness can be seen in three ways...

1. First, that we have no control over nature...

- Storms destroy our property.
- Droughts dry up our crops.
- Floods sweep away our cities.
- Carpenter ants eat our houses
- Racoons scatter our garbage.

2. Second, our weakness is seen in that we have no control over our own passions...

- We embarrass ourselves and destroy relationships through outbursts of anger.
- We become enslaved to sexual passions and stoop to filthy and shameful practices to satisfy them.
- We become addicted to drugs or drink or food so that they take dominion over us.
- We have quarrels among nations and live in fear of aggression from our fellow human beings.

3. Third, our weakness is seen in that we have no control over our health

- We cannot even keep ourselves alive.
- We all return to the dust from which we came.
- And during our time here, we experience sickness, injury, allergies, heart disease, pain, and all sorts of other physical infirmities.

TRANS> Everyone wishes he could have power over these things...

B. Much of our life is spent in the pursuit of power.

1. We build cars and planes so we can move about more efficiently.
 - We keep getting faster, but we still have many limitations—and accidents.

2. We build elaborate and beautiful shelters that we might shield ourselves from the weather— until an earthquake or a volcano or a tornado or a hurricane or a flood sweep them away.
3. We spend billions on our health and go to great lengths—modest improvements are made, but new diseases continue to crop up.
4. We spend billions on psychiatrists and social workers in an attempt to gain mastery over our behaviour, but divorce and depression and anxiety remain and rebellious children remain.
5. We spend billions on machinery for war, but we continue to live in fear of our enemies.

C. Many of the foolish things we do can also be explained by our craving for power.

1. We follow tyrants because they have power that we want to tap into—and the we do not want to be on the wrong side of.
 - This explains why people will follow a Hitler or a Stalin, even though they might not like much of what he does.
2. The same can be used to explain why people get into the occult...
 - Sure, some are just curious and looking for thrills...
 - But many people come to believe that they can gain some kind of mastery over their lives and over other people...
 - Ouija boards, palm readers, diviners, sorcerers—all of these are used to obtain control in some way.
 - All of these things are strictly forbidden in God’s word.
 - All through the ages, people have looked to higher powers that they suppose can be used to fulfill their dreams.
3. These Samaritans were obviously in search of power.
 - a. They had given themselves over to demons.
 - Many of them were possessed, as you can see by all the demons that Philip cast out according to verse 7...
 - And many followed this man Simon because they had seen him do feats of magic...
 - Look at verse 10—
 - v. 10: they call **“gave heed”** to him, **“from the least to the greatest, saying. ‘This man is the great power of God.’ And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time.”**
 - They hoped to get on the right said of this power so they could use it to advantage.

- b. Demon possession is a powerful example of what happens when people try to make use of unauthorised power...
 - They may initially have some success, but soon they are brought into terrible bondage—slavery to demons.
 - The power that looked so promising seizes them and takes them.
 - It is the same with everything from drugs to careerism to a seductress.
 - There is a promise of gain, but the outcome in bondage.
 - The power we need is the power of Jesus Christ.
 - That is the power the Samaritans needed as well.

II. See how the kingdom of Jesus came to Samaria with great power!

- In this we see the great power of our Lord.
- A. The one who introduced this power was poor, persecuted, fleeing Philip.
 1. How could it be that these power hungry Samaritans would listen to him?
 - Here he was running for his life—what kind of power was that?
 - Simon was rich, but Philip had left all to escape for his life.
 - He was destitute of house and land and possessed only what he was able to carry with him.
 2. But look! In verse 6, it says that they heeded him.
 - **v. 6: And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip!**
 - The verb—*heeded*—is the same one that was used of the response that these Samaritans had given to Simon when he claimed to be the great power of God and worked sorcery among them...
 - It is a word of respectful hearing, of not just listening, but of receptive hearing—of believing and receiving counsel.
 3. What was it that caused them to heed Philip?
 - a. We are told that Philip worked miracles among them.
 - Look at verse 6 and 7 and you can see how their heeding Philip is connected with seeing the miracles and signs he performed...
 - **Acts 8:6-7: And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed.**
 - b. Here was a power to be reckoned with!
 - Simon may have astonished them with some magic arts—perhaps he had made objects levitate or change form—

- Who knows what tricks he had up his sleeve?
- But here were real miracles that actually benefited people!
 - People were being released from the power of demons and healed from sicknesses and infirmities that they had endured for years!
 - They had been astonished by Simon, but now they were even more astonished by Philip!
 - Here was the true power of God!
- c. Even Simon himself was amazed when he saw the miracles and signs that Philip performed!
 - He followed Philip around like a wide-eyed groupie following after a rock star!
 - Verse 13 says that he **“continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.”**
 - He was like the Egyptian magicians who eventually confessed that what Moses was doing was the finger of God.

TRANS> These signs authenticated the message that Philip proclaimed to them!

B. What was the message that they heeded? What did Philip say to them?

1. Did he promise them power?

a. Well, yes he did!

- We are told very simply in verse 5 that He preached Christ to them!
- And you know what the message was about Christ!
 - It was that He was crucified by wicked men according to God’s purpose and foreknowledge,
 - and then raised again from the dead with power (authority) to forgive sins and bestow eternal life on all who believe!
 - There is no power to compare with that!
 - Just think—forgiveness! Eternal glorious life!
 - And the message was that He ascended into heaven to reign until He has brought all the nations under Him—
 - either as willing servants who come to be restored to God and His service...
 - or as trampled enemies who are cast into the place of outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.
 - Here was the true power of God—what Simon claimed to be!

TRANS> Philip was preaching the power of Jesus over sin and death and enemies!

- b. The miracles he did were a small demonstration of that power that is able to conquer all.
 - These Samaritans knew the power of Satan, but here Satan was cast out.
 - And they knew the power of sickness and infirmity, but here sickness and infirmity was overcome by the power of Jesus whom Philip preached.
 - Truly the kingdom of God had come among them and they were filled with joy because of it!
 - Verse 8 says, **“There was great joy in that city.”**
 - Don’t you just love to see the joy that comes to those who have been under bondage to Satan when they are released?

- 2. But there was something else about this message that made it unique!
 - a. Philip was the one who was doing all of these miracles,
 - yet he constantly spoke of Christ and gave all the glory to Him and did everything in His name...
 - the One he preached about who was crucified and then raised again and who ascended into heaven to reign.
 - It was *His* power and *His* reign that Philip was interested in!
 - Again, as verse 5 says,
 - **Acts 8:5: “He preached Christ to them.”**
 - And in verse 12 it says,
 - **Acts 8:12: “He preached the things concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ.”**
 - Philip’s message was very self-effacing—
 - It was not about Philip—it was about Jesus.

TRANS> This was not what the Samaritans were used to!

- b. This was such a huge contrast to Simon!
 - 1) Everything Simon said and did was about—Simon!
 - Look at what verse 9 says about him...
 - **Acts 8:9-10: But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, to whom they all gave heed from the least to the greatest, saying, ‘This man is the great power of God.’”**

- The poor souls of Samaria were so hungry for power that they had believed this man—
- 2) It's very sad to see what people will believe when they are desperate...
- Look at kids in school—even in university—they believe everything they are told!
 - Oodles of them actually believe in evolution—that life spontaneously evolved out of nothing... that over millions of years DNA was randomly formed!
 - And then you hear of people taking up with some Guru who preaches about giving everything up...
 - but who lives in a huge palace and is chauffeured around in a big limo and flies first class.
 - Or you have the Germans following Hitler and supposing he has all the answers for them...
 - Or a young woman putting herself into the arms of a young man who does not have her best interests at heart.
- c. Do you see the great difference in authority for self and authority exercised for God?
- We talk in this church about parents exercising authority—
 - And about men having authority over their wives in the home—
 - And about elders having authority to exercise discipline in the church.
 - This makes a lot of people very uneasy because they suppose that the authority is like that of Simon—or Hitler—or the Pope—
 - or like the abusive father they are so familiar with.
 - That is the only kind of authority they have ever seen and they don't want anything to do with it.
 - But the authority we are talking about is like that of Philip!
 - Philip is not preaching himself, but Christ Jesus the Lord!
 - Philip is a servant to the Samaritans for Jesus' sake.
 - His whole purpose is to follow Jesus and to lead others to follow Him also!
 - It's all about bringing people back to God from whom we were estranged in the fall!
 - This is where true power is to be found!
 - Not in Simon!
 - Not in Philip!
 - But in Christ whom Philip preaches.

- When a leader does this, instead of asking people to lay down their lives for him,
 - he lays down his life for them and calls them to lay down their lives for Jesus.
 - His goal is to make them devotees of Jesus Christ who lay down His life for us and who labours to make us good!
- It is so sad that people are afraid of Jesus' authority and power.
 - Of course they ought to be afraid if they are on the wrong side of it, but I mean that they are afraid to come and submit to Him.
 - That is so said because everything Jesus does when we come to Him is for our good...
 - Not that He leaves us to decide what that good is supposed to be—because we don't know.
 - We trust Him to take us in hand as disciples and to do what is good concerning us.

TRANS> And that was indeed the result of Philip's work!

C. Philip made the Samaritans disciples of Jesus Christ!

1. Look at what they did when they gave heed to his message...
 - You can see in verse 12:
 - **Acts 8:12: 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.**
 - Baptism is God's covenant sign under the new covenant—now that Jesus has come!
 - A baptism is a washing with water to symbolise purification.
 - The washing away of filth in us that is not desirable!
 - There were many baptisms in the Old Covenant pertaining to the tabernacle—
 - the priests and the worshippers had to be sprinkled with water for purification.
 - For example, in Numbers 19:13, we read about the need for “the water of purification” to be “sprinkled” on an unclean person.
 - These purifications with water are referred to in Hebrews 9:10 as “various washings”—
 - the word in the original is various *baptismois* (baptisms).

- Because baptism was already introduced in the Old Testament,
 - it is not explained in the New Testament—it is just done.
 - We are just told that John came baptising with a baptism of repentance—calling be to come to the Lord for cleansing.
 - But Baptism is often referred to as washing in the NT.
 - as *purification* in John 3:25 where John’s disciples dispute with Jesus’ disciples about baptism...
 - as *washing* in Acts 22:16 where Paul speaks of how Ananias was sent to tell him to “arise and be baptised, *washing* away your sins...”
 - and as having our bodies *washed with pure water* in Heb 10:22.
 - The Jews expected that the Christ would baptise when He came because it had been foretold by the prophets.
 - Their expectation is shown in John 1:25 when they ask John,
 - **John 1:25: "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"**
 - God had promised through Ezekiel that the day would come when He would sprinkle his people with clean water and give them a new heart and a new Spirit...
 - **Ezekiel 36:25-27 "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. 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. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.**
 - This was the promise of baptism that they were waiting for!
 - A baptism of power to make them holy and clean!
2. And so it was that when Jesus came and accomplished His work on the cross,
- He commanded His disciples to go into all the world and make disciples of Him by baptising them into the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
 - They were to give them this sign that Jesus had come to cleanse them from the filth of sin!
 - That was the good news!
 - a. And that is exactly what the apostles did.
 - They went everywhere preaching the good news that a Saviour had come to wash away our sin and calling people to be baptised in His name.

- At Pentecost, Peter preached Christ to them and commanded those who believed to be baptised in His name.
 - And now Philip is doing the same thing at Samaria.
 - By this they were taught to look to Jesus for cleansing—for washing—for the washing of regeneration that only Jesus can give!
 - They looked to Jesus for forgiveness and transformation—for removal of guilt and corruption that they might live unto God!
- b. Do you see?
- Our sin makes us filthy and odious in God’s sight—
 - We have no idea our repulsive we are to Him in our fallen estate!
 - But He sent Jesus to cleanse us!
 - Jesus went to the cross to die for our sins—to be punished for them—to bear the curse for us!
 - And He baptises us with the Holy Spirit to turn us to God—so that we repent of our sins and come to Him to transform us.
 - Over our whole life, the Spirit cleanses us so that we more and more die to sin and live to righteousness.
 - And all the while the blood of Jesus shed on the cross continues to cleanse us from our sin so that we are constantly forgiven.
- c. This is the true significance of baptism!
- 1) It is not just a cultural thing!
 - It is coming to Jesus for power of forgiveness and of a new life.
 - It is identifying Him as the One who baptises us.
 - Getting water sprinkled on you does not take away your sin.
 - Trusting in Jesus is what takes away your sin.
 - If you are driving down the road and you see a sign with a juicy hamburger on it,
 - the sign does not help you at all unless you go where the sign directs you and get that burger!
 - You can hang out in front of the picture all day, but you have to eat to benefit from the sign!
 - So also, the mere receiving of the sign that Jesus cleanses you does not cleanse you—
 - You must turn to Him and submit to His cleansing.
 - 2) That is why we will not administer baptism unless a credible profession of faith is made.

- I have had people who do not profess to be looking to Christ for cleansing ask me to baptise them—but I absolutely refuse!
 - It is just an empty sign without faith.
 - You see in verse 12 that it tells us that when men and women *believed*, they were baptised.
 - Those who did not believe were not baptised.
- So by baptism, these Samaritans identified with Jesus and His saving work.
 - They became His disciples, looking to Him for forgiveness and new life.
 - They were now His devotees instead of Simon’s devotees.

3) But what about their little children?

- They are sinners too who need to be cleansed.
 - Surely every Christian parent wants his child to receive the cleansing that Jesus gives!
 - But children are not old enough to profess that they are looking to Jesus to be washed.
- So what is to be done with them?
 - Are Christian parents to just leave them until they are old enough to speak for themselves?
 - No! Christian parents are encouraged to bring their children to Jesus for His cleansing from the very start.
 - They are brought to Jesus on the basis of the parent’s profession.
- This is not an idea that we would have ever come up with on our own.
 - You don’t have this kind of thing in pagan religion.
 - It was God’s idea when He first established His covenant of grace with Abraham and told him in Genesis 17 that He would be His God.
 - At that time, He gave him circumcision as a sign of the covenant...
 - But He also did something remarkable!
 - He told Abraham to circumcise his sons when they were only eight days old!
 - Long before they could have any understanding of the promised cleansing that was represented by circumcision!

- And the Lord promised not only to be the God of Abraham, but He said:
 - **Gen 17:7: "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you.**
- Some people in our day complain that it doesn't make sense to give a covenant sign to children who can't yet understand it,
 - but I guess they will have to take that up with God.
 - He is the one who ordered it to be done.
 - And unless someone can prove that God somewhere along the way decided to exclude children from His covenant,
 - it remains our duty to give the sign of the covenant in this present age to children whose parents are trusting in Jesus.
- God does not require us to leave them in limbo, but He receives them with their parents.
 - Of course if they do not keep the covenant, He says that they are to be cut off—just as they were supposed to be under the Old Covenant.
 - To her shame, the church has often failed to do this, but that is what we are supposed to do,
 - just as we are supposed to do that with adults who do not continue in God's covenant.
 - We don't bring anybody in because we know they believe—we bring them in because they profess to believe.
- And children who have the privilege of growing up under covenant keeping parents do not have to be left outside.
 - They come in on the basis of their parent's profession.
 - And their parents are expected, of course, to tell them what the sign means and to teach them to constantly look to Jesus to be washed.
 - Most little children whose parents are cheerfully doing this are quite cheerful to do it too.
 - Jesus said we need to become receptive like little children if we want to enter His kingdom.
 - Even though they are born in sin, God works in them by His Spirit and word in answer to our prayers and we are to expect them to grow up looking to Jesus.

Conclusion: So you see how powerful the gospel was at Samaria.

- It took sinful Samaritans who were so hungry for power that they followed this Simon fellow...
 - And it brought them to Jesus and joined them to Him by faith and baptism—to Him who has all power in heaven and earth to pardon sins and give eternal life to whomsoever He chooses.
 - Praise be to His holy name!
- Next week, we will continue and see how Simon missed the point.