

Acts 8:4-24

Introduction

Over our last couple of weeks in Acts, we've seen how the proclamation of the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ has spread outside Jerusalem, and even outside the boundaries of Judea, to Samaria. We remember that the point, here, is not so much a lesson about numerical "church growth" as it is the expansion of the church in redemptive-historical categories—from Jew (Jerusalem and Judea) to Samaritan (Samaria) to Gentile (the end of the earth; 1:8). The book of Acts is Luke's account of this end-times, eschatological expansion—of this now all-encompassing "new creation" in Christ. Along the way, of course, there are many other related themes and interwoven emphases—one of which we'll come to see in our passage this morning. We read in chapter eight, verses 4-8:

I. Acts 8:4-8 — Therefore, those who had been scattered [because of the persecution that arose in connection with the martyrdom of Stephen] went about, **proclaiming the good news of the word**. Now Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began **preaching Christ** to them. And the crowds with one accord were paying careful attention to what was being said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was doing. 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 great joy in that city.

We've seen over and over again—not only throughout Acts, but also in the Gospel of John (cf. Matthew) and even when we were in the book of Exodus—that "true" miracles, in the Bible, never come from out of nowhere. They're never just random novelties. Miracles always assume for their own validation and for their own authentication a redemptive-historical context—the context of a redemptive history that began all the way back in the Garden of Eden when the Creator God first promised that the seed of the woman would triumph over the seed of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). Miracles are "true," therefore, only insofar as they *signify* (as "*signs*") and point us to the further progressive unfolding and/or the final fulfillment of God's redemptive word and promise—which is the ultimate "miracle."

Keeping these things in mind, here in these verses we see first of all how those who were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria went about "proclaiming the good news of the word." We're not told that they were all performing miracles, but "only" that they were proclaiming the good news of *the word*—"the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" (8:12), the eschatological, end times fulfillment of redemptive history. Immediately after this, Luke tells us that Philip was "preaching Christ" to the Samaritans (he was preaching Christ—the Messiah—as the end times, eschatological fulfillment of redemptive history). Then Luke emphasizes how "the crowds with one accord were paying careful attention to what was being *said* by Philip, as they *heard* and saw the signs which he was doing." Notice how pride of place is given not to what Philip was doing (the signs) and certainly not to Philip himself, but rather to what Philip was saying. What's the true "miracle," here? It's the fulfillment in history of that Gospel promise that God first gave to Adam and Eve in the Garden. The other miracles that Philip was performing, then, were all "signs" (*semeion*) *signifying* the true nature of this greatest of all wonders—the Messiah's salvation. Luke writes: "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.” In previous sermons, we’ve seen how we can only fully understand these miracles in the light of the message or word (*logos*) that they accompany. We can only fully understand these miracles in the light of the prior unfolding of redemptive history. In short, it’s the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of redemptive history which—*itself*— invests these miracles (as they’re being performed at this specific moment in redemptive history) with their true meaning and their true persuasive power. In other words, it’s the very “word” which these miracles are given to authenticate which itself so powerfully and so wonderfully authenticates these miracles. This is what explains Luke’s concluding statement: “So there was great joy in that city.” The people were rejoicing not simply in the signs, but in all the fullness of that eschatological salvation to which the miraculous signs were pointing and which they themselves were now experiencing. Take away the “signs,” and the reality to which they were pointing will still remain. Take away the “signs,” and the Gospel to which they were testifying will be no less true and no less wonderful. Take away the “signs,” and our own joy, today, is not diminished.

In the light of all this, then, let’s read again with perhaps a fuller appreciation Acts 8, verses 4-8: “Therefore, those who had been scattered went about, **proclaiming the good news of the word**. Now Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began **preaching Christ** to them. And the crowds with one accord were **paying careful attention to what was being said** by Philip, **as they heard and saw the signs** which he was doing. 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 great joy in that city.**”

II. Acts 8:9–11 — Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astounding the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; and they all, from smallest to greatest, were paying careful attention to him, saying, “This man is what is called the Great Power of God.” And they were paying careful attention to him because he had for a long time astounded them with his magic arts.

When we’ve seen and tasted of the truth, isn’t the counterfeit immediately obvious? It seems most likely that the “magic” Simon practiced involved the invoking of supernatural powers (cf. Louw-Nida). So there’s a sense in which we might say that Simon’s “magic arts” were just as “real” as the miraculous signs that Philip was doing. The question, then, is not so much, “Were they real?” but rather, “Were they *true*?” Were Simon’s magic arts authenticated and validated by a larger redemptive-historical context to which they themselves were pointing? The answer is self-evidently “no, they were not.”

The Samaritan populace was engaged in a kind of syncretism (cf. 2 Kings 17:24-41). On the one hand, they accepted the Pentateuch (the first five books of Moses as the word of God). On the other hand, they were all saying of Simon, who was “claiming to be someone great”: “This man is what is called the Great Power of God.” But the question they should have been asking themselves is: What does Simon have to do with Moses? More specifically: What place does Simon (and the “miracles” he performs) have in the further unfolding of redemptive history—of that word of Gospel promise that God first gave to Adam and Eve in the garden?

Simon was seeking to tap in to the supernatural—he was seeking to use “God,” as it were—for the advancement of self. In stark contrast to this, in the case of Philip we see God using Philip to proclaim his own sovereignty (“the kingdom of God”) in the salvation of sinners (in the proclamation of “the name of Jesus Christ [the Messiah]”). In Luke’s account of Philip, pride of place is given not to what Philip was doing (not to the miracles for their own sake) and certainly not to Philip himself, but rather to what Philip was saying—to the “good news of the word,” and *then* to the miracles only insofar as they were entirely subservient to this Gospel word. The miracles Philip performed were all “signs,” *signifying*—and even explaining—the true nature of Messiah’s salvation. But in the case of Simon the focus is entirely on the “miracles” (the “magic arts”) as ends in themselves. In verse 9, Luke says that Simon had been “astounding” (*existemi*) the people of Samaria, and then in verse 11 that “he had for a long time astounded [*existemi*] them with his magic arts.” The emphasis, here, is on an amazement at the “miracles” only for the sake of the “miracles” and on a corresponding amazement at Simon himself, who was “claiming to be someone great.” The only point of Simon’s miracles, in other words, was their “wow” factor—their only purpose to create a personality cult around Simon as someone who could tap into and “harness” the power of “God” – the power of the supernatural.

Therefore, if the “miracles” of both Simon and Philip are “real,” only the miracles of Philip are “true.” Only the miracles of Philip were “signs” proclaiming the sovereign rule of God in and through His Messiah in the gracious salvation of sinners. Only the miracles of Philip were authenticated and validated themselves by something far greater than themselves—by that climactic, eschatological fulfillment of the Gospel word that God first gave to Adam and Eve in the garden. This is what explains why the magic arts of Simon could only produce *astonishment* (*existemi*) among the people, while the signs that Philip was doing were bringing *great joy* (*polys chara*) to the people. As Christians, God has not called us to be credulous (gullible, naïve, and impressionable), but rather to be a people of faith—faith in His sovereign, saving *word*.

In verse 5, we see Philip “**preaching Christ.**” In verse 9, we see Simon “**claiming to be someone great.**” In verses 6-7, we see the “**signs**” that Philip was doing. In verse 11 we see the “**magic arts**” that Simon was practicing. In verse 6, we see that the crowds with one accord were “**giving attention [prosecho]**” to what was being said by Philip. In verse 10, we see that previously all the people from smallest to greatest were “**giving attention [prosecho]**” to Simon. In verse 8, we’re told that in response to the *preaching of Philip* “there was **great joy** in that city.” In verse 11, we’re told that in response to the *magic arts of Simon*, the people were only “**astounded.**” Clearly, Luke wants us to see, here, the difference between the truth and the counterfeit. He wants us to see—and even to feel—the difference between that which is truly God-exalting and that which is fundamentally man-exalting—between that which manifests the true sovereignty of God in His gracious salvation of sinners and that which would make God the tool of autonomous and self-serving human beings. In the end, it’s clear that Luke wants us to see the difference between a credulous people full of astonishment and a faith-filled people full of joy. So, after beginning with Philip and the response to his preaching in verses 4-8 and then describing the previous activity of Simon and the response to his magic arts in verses 9-11, Luke writes in verse 12:

III. Acts 8:12 — But when they believed Philip **proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ**, they were being baptized, both men and women.

Here is the triumph of the truth over the counterfeit—of faith over credulity. Here is the triumph of the good news about the saving sovereignty of God revealed in the gracious salvation of sinners over all the efforts of sinful man to “harness” the power of God for his own advancement. But then we go on to read in verse 13:

IV. Acts 8:13 — Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he was continually devoting himself to Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly astounded.

Luke says that Simon “believed” without any further qualification, and that upon this believing, he was baptized. And yet for all this, there are warning signs. In the first place, Luke says that Simon was “continually devoting himself [*proskartereo*] to Philip.” Elsewhere in Acts, we see the disciples “continually devoting themselves [*proskartereo*] to prayer” (1:14; 6:4; cf. Rom. 12:12; Col. 4:2), we see them “continually devoting themselves [*proskartereo*] to the teaching of the apostles and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers” (2:42), and we see them “daily devoting themselves [*proskartereo*] with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house” (2:46). But nowhere else do we see a believer continually devoting himself to another disciple. Other translations say that he “followed Philip everywhere” (NIV) or that he “went around constantly with Philip” (HCSB; cf. NRSV; NET). When we’ve understood the true preeminence and glory of Christ as the one who has ushered in—and who is Himself—the eschatological fulfillment of redemptive history, then there’s something fundamentally not right about Simon’s attachment to Philip. There’s always something “not right”—and ultimately even damning—about any religious attachment to any man as one who mediates to us, or stands in the place of, Christ Himself.

Not only was Simon continually devoting himself to Philip but, in the second place, Luke tells us that “as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly *astounded* [*existemi*; (imp.)].” The last time we heard this word (astounded) was in verses 9 and 11 where it was the people of Samaria who were “astounded” by Simon’s magic arts. Are we to suspect, then, that Simon sees in the signs and great miracles that were taking place only a more impressive version of his own “magic arts”—only a more advanced “harnessing” of the supernatural? Is Simon more amazed at the signs and miracles than he is at the far greater eschatological salvation to which these signs and miracles were pointing, and which was, itself, the authentication and validation of the signs and miracles? If so, then we could say that Simon himself is just as credulous and just as lacking in true faith as the people of Samaria were previously. Or perhaps we could say that he’s blinded to an even greater extent than they ever were. Simon obviously sees a difference between his “magic arts” and the “signs and great miracles” that he’s observing now. Here were miracles of a kind that he himself had never dreamed of being able to perform. The question is, is Simon just seeing “bigger and better”? Or is he seeing that most fundamental difference between his own efforts to use God—as it were—for the advancement of self on the one hand, and, on the other hand, God using Philip to proclaim his own absolute sovereignty in and through the gracious salvation of sinners?

There does seem to be something fundamentally amiss, here. But if this is so, then what about Luke's statement that even Simon believed and was baptized? All we can say at the moment is that Simon's faith must have appeared—at least initially—to be just as sincere as the faith of all the rest of the Samaritans who were being baptized. And yet we know from other places in Scripture that not all belief proves itself in the end to have been a true, saving belief (cf. Jn. 8:30-31; 2:23-25). We read in John chapter two:

- John 2:23–25 (cf. 8:30-31) — Now when [Jesus] was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, when they saw His signs which He was doing. But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He had no need that anyone bear witness concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.

In the end, what can we say that Simon actually believed? At the very least, he believed that Philip was empowered by God and that the words he was speaking must be the truth. But did he truly comprehend what that truth was? Did he truly understand the *meaning* of the signs? Was his astonishment matched, and even rendered insignificant, by the “great joy” in his heart? We go on to read in verses 14-17:

V. Acts 8:14–17 — 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.

Two weeks ago, we looked at these verses in the light of their redemptive-historical context. The same Holy Spirit who was poured out upon the Jews in Jerusalem at Pentecost with accompanying visible signs (Acts 2) has now been poured out upon the Samaritans—also with accompanying visible signs. God has made it abundantly clear that this is the same work of the same Spirit in part by the fact that in this specific instance He sovereignly delayed the Samaritan's reception of the Spirit (in all His eschatological fullness and with accompanying visible signs) until the apostles Peter and John had come down from Jerusalem and prayed for them and laid their hands on them. Obviously, God was not temporarily restricted by the absence of Peter and John. Neither was it up to Peter and John to tap into the divine power of a reluctant God and bestow the Holy Spirit themselves. At every step along the way, it's God who is freely and sovereignly choosing to bestow the gift of His eschatological Spirit upon those who believe, according to His own gracious promise. We see this truth illustrated in Acts chapter 9 when the Lord said to Ananias:

- Acts 9:11–12, 17 — “Rise up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight.” ... So Ananias departed and entered the house. And he laid his hands on him and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord sent me—that is Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming—so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Ananias isn't a magician, invoking the supernatural power of God in order that *he* might open Saul's eyes, much less in order that *he* might "dispense" the Holy Spirit! Instead, it's God who graciously grants that Saul's eyes might be opened and that he might be filled with the Holy Spirit by Himself commanding Ananias to go and lay his hands on Saul. Back in chapter two, in response to the people's question—"Men, brothers, what should we do?"—Peter answers:

- Acts 2:38–39 — "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit [there's nothing here about the laying on of hands]. For **the promise** is for you and your children and for all who are far off, **as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.**"

Once again, we see the absolute freedom of God's grace—the sovereignty of God revealed in the salvation of sinners. Could there be any greater contrast with the "magic" that Simon was practicing previously? In the one case, "God" (or the supernatural) is "used" for the promotion and exaltation of man. In the other case, God sovereignly saves sinners for the promotion and exaltation of Himself—of His own infinite goodness, and wisdom, and power.

We see the contrast with the magic that Simon was practicing previously, but what about now that Simon has believed and been baptized? We go on, now, to read in verses 18-19:

VI. Acts 8:18–19 — Now when Simon saw that the Spirit had been 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."

Do we naturally, instinctively recoil when we hear these words? Are we even grieved? Simon has imported his old worldview into his new profession of Christ, still assuming that God may be "harnessed" for his own purposes—still assuming that man can pull God's "strings," as it were, for his own advancement and happiness. Simon has supposed that he may purchase the rights not just to the "signs" that Philip was doing, but even to that ultimate manifestation of God's sovereignty in the salvation of sinners—the eschatological gift of the Holy Spirit. Simon has supposed that he can purchase the authority to bestow the Spirit according to his own will, upon whomever he may lay his hands. But to this we can only respond with all our heart: May it never be! Because if the gift of God's Spirit and of resurrection life is not absolutely sovereign and "free"—if it's not truly a "gift" to all those whom God has called to Himself—then every sinner must, in the end, be condemned. We could not go up into heaven to bring Christ down. Neither could we go down into the abyss to bring Christ up from the dead (Rom. 10:5-6). But God *is* sovereign. And therein lies the fundamental, all-important difference between the revealed truth of the Bible and every other counterfeit form of religion or spirituality that man has ever invented. Since God is sovereign, and since this sovereignty has been manifested above all in the salvation of sinners, then we see by faith (without any credulity at all) that it's only the God of the Bible who saves. More than this, we see that the God of the Bible *has* revealed our salvation in Jesus and in the gift of the Holy Spirit which Jesus has obtained for us through His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of God. And so we hear with "great joy" these words of Peter: "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For **the promise** is for you and your children and for all who are far off, **as many as the Lord our God will call to**

Himself.” This is what, to us, is more astounding than all the miraculous signs in all the world. And this astoundment is not the mark of credulity, but of faith.

Simon has supposed that he may purchase the rights to that ultimate manifestation of God’s sovereignty in the salvation of sinners—the eschatological gift of the Holy Spirit:

VII. Acts 8:20–23 — But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you supposed you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have no part or portion in this matter [*logos*; word], for your heart is not right before God. Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray earnestly to 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 unrighteousness.”

Is Peter’s response “overkill”? Is it harsh and unkind? By now we should be able to see that it’s not, at all! It’s Peter’s last and best attempt to see Simon come to true repentance. Simon must be stripped of everything if he is to truly understand the sovereignty of God’s grace and the absolute freedom of His gift. The wickedness of his attempts to “harness” God and pull God’s strings—as it were—must be fully exposed if he’s ever to know the true joy of repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

VIII. Acts 8:24 — But Simon answered and said, “Pray earnestly to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.”

Simon is fearful—even terrified, but he still refuses to submit himself to the sovereignty of God’s gift. He still supposes that God may be manipulated by those whose prayers are more “powerful” than his own. He still fails to see that it’s precisely because of the sovereignty of God’s grace and the absolute freedom of His gift that anyone—from the smallest even to the greatest—can come to God *himself* and pray to Him and be forgiven.

Have you responded to the sovereignty of God’s grace and the absolute freedom of His gift with the astonishment not of credulity but of faith and great joy? Have you given up every effort to pull God’s strings and harness Him for your own purposes and submitted yourself, instead, to the gift that He freely gives to all whom He has called to Himself? But, of course, this isn’t just something that’s “once and done”; it’s a life, now, that we’re called to live—a life of always humbling ourselves under the mighty (sovereign) hand of God, knowing that He always cares for us (1 Pet. 5:6-7).