



APRIL 25, 2021 | PASTOR TIMOTHY SONG

“Warnings of False Conversion” (Acts 8:4-25)

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. ⁵ Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. ⁶ When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. ⁷ For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸ So there was great joy in that city.

⁹ Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, ¹⁰ and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, “This man is rightly called the Great Power of God.” ¹¹ They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery. ¹² But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. ¹³ Simon himself believed and was baptized and he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

¹⁴ When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. ¹⁵ When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸ When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money ¹⁹ and said, “Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”

²⁰ Peter answered: “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! ²¹ You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. ²² 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. ²³ For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.”

²⁴ Then Simon answered, “Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me.”

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.

Core Idea: Faith not rooted in a right heart with God and without repentance is a false faith.



INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon Church. As you know this year, Pastor Peter has been preaching through the letter to the Philippians, but Pastor Woohyun and I have been going through a miniseries preaching from the book of Acts and we will be continuing today, so please open your Bibles to Acts 8:4-25. This is a humbling and sobering text. We are reminded of the warnings and dangers of false conversion. May the Lord speak and convict our hearts as we read His Word. Please follow along as I read.

[Read the text.]

Today's text marks a shift in the story of Acts. We've already seen the transforming power of the Gospel in Jerusalem. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon 120. There were signs and wonders displayed. The church was formed. Peter and the other apostles courageously preached the Gospel, and thousands were being saved in the city, but here in chapter 8, the preaching of the Gospel and its transforming power is spread to the surrounding regions of Judea and Samaria. Look with me in verse 4: "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went." The church was scattered throughout the regions of Judea except for the apostles. We know what the power of the Gospel was doing in Jerusalem and the believers there, but in chapter 7, Stephen was martyred, and, out of fear of persecution and death, Christians scattered.

In verse 5, we are introduced to Philip who went to Samaria and preached the Gospel. This is the same Philip who was one of seven men chosen to serve the widows who were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. These men were characterized as being full of the Spirit and wisdom. But now, he's no longer waiting on tables. Here we see him taking on the role of an evangelist and he has gone into hostile territory.

Philip was preaching in the city of Samaria. If you've read through the Scriptures, you know that there was always hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans. The Jews regarded the Samaritans as unclean half-breeds. Hundreds of years before this, Assyrians relocated and settled in northern regions of Israel and the Samaritans were descendants of intermarriages, therefore, Jews considered Samaritans unclean. All to say, there was a division between them.

Imagine the shock when the Jewish Christians heard that Samaritans were hearing and believing the Gospel and being saved. This was all part of Jesus' plan and mission for His Church. Do you remember what His last words were to His disciples as He ascended into heaven? In Acts 1:8, Jesus says (and this is the thesis of this Book): "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth". Did you catch that? You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem (check!), and in ALL JUDEA AND SAMARIA! The mission of the Church is on the move. The Gospel is advancing, and revival is happening in Samaria!

But now we get to the main part of today's text. It's a story about a man named Simon. Verse 9 tells us that Simon practiced sorcery. He was a magician. But not the kind of magician who does card tricks and pulled rabbits out of their hat. He practiced dark magic to perform signs and wonders to amaze and astonish people. Simon was a man of self-importance. He convinced people all over Samaria that he was someone great. They gave their attention to him and exclaimed, "This man is rightly called the Great Power of God" (verse 10). So we can see that Simon was performing signs that convinced people that he had some sort of divine power. But then, Philip entered Samaria with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and look with me in verse 6: "When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said." The attention that Simon received shifted to Philip and the Gospel! Even Simon was drawn to Philip. It says that Simon "himself believed and was baptized" (verse 13).



However, if we take a closer look at this story, why do you think Luke (the author of Acts) took the time to tell us about Simon? It's to give us a warning. It's a warning to the Church that a person can think that they are saved, but they may not be. Through Simon, I want to address three warnings for us to pay close attention to.

FIRST WARNING: BEWARE OF FALSE CONVERSION.

The first warning is this: Beware of false conversion. There is a "faith" and "believing" that does not save, even though the Gospel is proclaimed, and signs and wonders are seen. Verse 12 says that Philip "proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" and he was also doing "great signs and miracles" (Verse 13b). So, both the preaching of the Word and signs were being done in Samaria by Philip and many believed and were baptized.

Simon himself believed and was baptized and he followed Philip everywhere, but there is evidence that shows Simon's belief was false. The apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaritans were hearing and accepting the word of God. So, they sent Peter and John to Samaria and read with me in verses 15-17:

¹⁵ When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there **that they might receive the Holy Spirit**, ¹⁶ **because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them**; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Let me pause here to address something: Why is it that the Holy Spirit did not come on the Samaritan believers immediately when they believed in Jesus as their Lord and Saviour? They were even baptized. Why was it that only when Peter and John placed their hands on them, that they received the Holy Spirit? Does that mean you receive the Spirit only when an anointed Christian place a hand on you?

That's not what Peter preached in his first sermon in Acts 2:38: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Apostle Paul later on wrote, "And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the Gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 1:13). So, what's going on here?

Well, God waited until the apostles arrived in Samaria and laid hands on the believers before giving them the Holy Spirit because this was a very special occasion taking place. An article I read described it as "the equivalent of the Samaritans version of Pentecost". It was the first time the Samaritans received the Spirit and God waited until the apostles could be there to witness it.

Why did God do that? So that the apostles, who were Jews, could see that the Samaritans were receiving the same Holy Spirit that they received at Pentecost! Therefore, there is no difference in class or status in the Church and among Christians. This was for the sake of the unity of the Church! IN ADDITION, this advanced the Gospel so that there would be Christ's witnesses in Judea and Samaria (Acts 1:8). This was an important event in the Church's history as now we know that the Gospel was preached and reached to the ends of the earth. We are all witnesses of this!

Ok, let's come back to Simon. So, the believers received the Spirit signalling true conversion and unity of the Church. Notice that it doesn't say that Simon received the Spirit.



In fact, this is what happens. Beginning from verse 18 it says:

¹⁸When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money ¹⁹and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

I take this to mean that Simon was not truly converted. He thought that the gift of the Spirit was something you can purchase, but you can't. It is a gift of grace from God alone. The receiving of the Holy Spirit was proof and evidence of the gift of salvation. Simon saw ability and power. He saw signs and miracles that was greater than any sorcery he performed. He wanted to pay for something that is priceless. He didn't have true faith.

APPLICATION: I wonder if we are tempted to think this way at times. Haven't we tried to "purchase" something from God? When we have our doubts about our faith, don't we start to think of ways to earn our salvation? The point is that there is a faith or a believing that does not save.

Think of the parable of the four soils. In Luke 8:13, Jesus describes the second soil like this: "Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away." The faith is not real saving faith. Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 15:1-2: "Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ²By this gospel you are saved, **if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you**. Otherwise, you have believed in vain." There is a such thing as "believing in vain".

Simon's "faith" was not a saving faith but a false faith. It was a false conversion. Maybe for some of us, we need to heed this warning. [Pandemic brings clarity to the heart].

SECOND WARNING: CONSIDER WHAT THE OBJECT OF YOUR FAITH IS.

The second warning is this: Consider what the object of your faith is. We see that Simon's object of faith was not Jesus Christ, but power, signs and wonders. Simon was a sorcerer. He spent years receiving praise and attention from the people of Samaria. He had followers who were amazed at what he could do. But when Philip came along and not only preached but performed signs and miracles, such as healing people and driving out demons, Simon was drawn to that power. It was a power that was stronger than his. So he decided to follow Philip. He wanted that power badly.

The object of his faith was the power of signs and miracles. He was amazed by what Philip did. Simon thought Philip was simply a miracle worker. He was also impressed by what Peter and John did. With the receiving of the Spirit, there must have been some manifestation of the Spirit, namely the speaking of tongues, that drew Simon's attention. He blatantly just asks, "How much for me to be able to that?" Simon was willing to give up everything he knew and had to obtain this power. But Simon missed the point. Philip preached and performed signs and miracles to point people to Christ, the Son of God, who died for sinners, rose from the dead to conquer sin and death, to save sinners like you and me.

Jesus must be the object of our faith, but Simon was short sighted. His faith centered on what he always sought: power, praise, and attention. He reminds me a lot of Ananias and Sapphira! In their pride, greed, selfishness, and desire for praise, they sinned against God and they were put to death. This is another reminder to the Church to fix your eyes and hearts on Christ as the author and perfecter of our faith.



You know, if we're being honest, everyone would pay attention to miracles. If you saw a person being healed from their diseases, if you saw demons being cast out, you'd be amazed. Perhaps we've prayed this way before: "God, if you do [blank], then I'll believe. If you heal my loved one from cancer or another disease, then I'll know You're real and I'll follow You." Signs and miracles are not meant to be bad. But they are not meant to be the focus! Miracles serve to allow the preaching of the Gospel. You see that in the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus knew His calling and mission. He urgently proclaimed the Gospel wherever He went. But He also showed compassion and healed many. But with every healing and miracle, there was always the preaching of God's Word. You see that in today's text with Philip. Miracles serve to point us to Christ -- the true object of our faith.

Brothers and sisters, what is the object of your faith? This is a warning for us too. The object of our faith must be Christ.

THIRD WARNING: TRUE CONVERSION REQUIRES REPENTANCE.

The third warning is this: True conversion requires repentance. We see from Simon that there was amazement but no repentance. In verses 9-13, the word "amaze" appears three times. Verse 9: "Simon...amazed all the people of Samaria" (with his sorcery). Verse 11: "They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery". So the first two words are attributed to the people's amazement of Simon. But in verse 13, we see that Simon is amazed by the great signs and miracles he saw Philip doing. The NIV uses the word "astonished", but the Greek word is the same.

Being amazed does not equate to true conversion. Simon was missing something and that was repentance. What was Peter's response to Simon offering money to have the ability he saw the apostles do? Did he say, "Oh Simon, you don't seem to understand!" That's not what he says. Look at verse 20 with me: Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money!"

The literal translation for what Peter said was, "To hell with you and your money!" Imagine Peter saying those words to you. "May you and your money rot! May you and your money perish! May you and your money be condemned!" Peter makes sure that there is no room for interpretation. This is a curse! It is the strongest curse possible, and Peter continues by saying, "You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God" (verse 21).

Simon has no part in the Gospel; the proclamation and power of it and he has no part in any of this because his heart is not right with God. Peter doesn't say it's a matter of learning or experience. This isn't ignorance. He's very clear: "Your heart is not right with God!" Your affections and governing motives are not on Christ and the Gospel. You're not driven by the love of Christ but by the love for power and things of this world. Peter saw clearly what was in his heart. Put yourself in Simon's shoes. How would feel if you heard these words directed at you?

Even though Peter puts Simon in his place with this terrifying curse, he also provides the way for deliverance. Verse 22 says, "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."

What was missing in Simon was a deep conviction of sin which leads to repentance. The word "repent" is mentioned multiple times in the book of Acts meaning, "a turning from sin to God" and if Simon did repent, the evil intention of his heart would be forgiven. However, we see that Simon was not persuaded.



Listen to what John MacArthur wrote:

Although shaken and afraid, he refused to ask the Lord for forgiveness... His only concern was to escape the temporal consequences of his sin. True repentance, however, consists of more than mere sorrow for sin.

Peter's not done yet. In verse 23, Peter says, "For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin." The phrase "full of bitterness" is found in Deuteronomy 29:17-18 and it is a reference to people who are enslaved to the sin of idolatry, which is like bitter poison, slowly killing you. Simon's idol was power, and attention and he is still in bondage to his sin. Brothers and sisters, are there idols in your life that you are still bound to? Does the Gospel expose what is in your heart? Does our sinfulness bring to us a sorrow that leads us to repentance? For Simon, there was no repentance.

What was Simon's response to Peter? Verse 24: "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me." What do you think of that prayer? It's not really a prayer. It's more of a request actually. Peter says, "Repent" and Simon says, "You pray for me". John Stott said, "What really concerned him [Simon] was not that he might receive God's pardon, but only that he might escape God's judgment which Peter had threatened him". At the forefront of Simon's mind is not the forgiveness of sin but the receiving of power. But he doesn't want this bad thing, this curse, to happen to him. His heart is not right before God.

Brothers and sisters, why does Luke spend the time to tell the story of Simon? To warn the Church. To warn the Church that not everyone who appears to be Christian really is. There is "faith" that does not save. Isn't that a sobering truth? It's a scary thing. Simon had the appearance. He said and did the right thing. He was amazed by the preaching and the signs. It says that he believed and was baptized. He was sincere! But being sincere is not how you are saved. You are saved in Jesus Christ! Sixteenth-century theologian Zacharias Ursinus said this about true faith:

True faith is not only a knowledge and conviction that everything God reveals in His Word is true; it is also a deep-rooted assurance created in me by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel that, out of sheer grace earned for us by Christ, not only others, but I too, have had my sins forgiven, have been made forever right with God, and have been granted salvation.

CONCLUSION

We must pay close attention to God's Word and the warning He's giving us here today. The Gospel exposes our hearts. We must ask ourselves, "Is my heart right with God? Do I have the assurance of the forgiveness of my sins and salvation?" If yes, great joy should fill our hearts like it did for the believers in Samaria, but perhaps you are listening and not yet a Christian and your heart is not right with God... maybe you can ask someone, "Will you pray for me?" Ask one of the pastors, elders, a family member, friend. But ultimately, you need to go to Christ yourself and say, "Christ, save me." and if you pray today believing that your heart is not right with God and you confess to God that you are a sinner in need of Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, you can receive the gift of salvation.

I'll close with this. People are hungry to know that their sins are forgiven. You may have people interested in signs and miracles. But at the very core of our being, we want to know that our sins can be forgiven. It is the Gospel of Jesus Christ that sets us free and gives us the assurance of forgiveness and salvation. The power of the Gospel can really, truly save us, but let us also be warned that things aren't always as they appear to be. Let us not be blinded by false faith and false conversion.



Preach the Gospel to your heart. Preach the Gospel to one another. Be sent like the Christians were in Acts to be witnesses of Christ to the ends of the earth. The Gospel saves. Cling to Christ.

Let's pray.