

Clifford was one of the first people I met when our family started attend the church where we ultimately would come to faith in Jesus Christ. Clifford was an evangelist of the old tradition. It seems like he said the name Jesus in every sentence that came out of his mouth, but it did not feel repetitious. The way he pronounced “Jesus” sounded fresh and powerful every time. Clifford was in his 70’s when we first came to know him; he had been an evangelist from sometime in his early twenties, a couple years after he had come to know Jesus as his Lord and Savior. The story was that Clifford had lived a pretty rough life up to that time, which caused him to get into trouble with just about every employer he worked for. And then he got an interview with the manager of well-known prominent hotel in the city. The manager decided to take a chance and he hired Clifford to be the daytime elevator operator at the hotel, and he was to start on the next day. That evening a friend of Clifford’s invited him to attend a crusade event in a church, and it was there the evangelist gave an invitation and Clifford came forward and gave his heart and life to Jesus. The next morning the new born-again Clifford, full of the Spirit, showed up at the hotel. He was given a uniform, taught the proper etiquette as to how to address the guests of the hotel, instructed as to how to operate the elevator, and after observing him the manager left Clifford to do his job. The first guest to step into the elevator was wealthy woman in her senior years, who asked Clifford to take her to the top floor of the hotel. Clifford’s mind began to race. He has just come to know Jesus and he wanted this woman to know Jesus too! And so, as the elevator made its way up, Clifford turned to the woman and with a zealous passion asked her: “Are you ready to die?” Well, Clifford was fired from his job at the hotel but he found other employment as an overnight security guard at a warehouse - which allowed him to go to Bible school during the day, and study and read the Bible all night. Clifford became an evangelist and many came know Jesus throughout the next 50 years of his life.

As we step into our text for today, we do so in the backdrop of someone who had already come to know Jesus and was “ready to die” for Jesus. In our text from last week we saw that Stephen, who had been appointed by the leadership of the church to serve food to the Greek-speaking Christian widows who *had not* been born in Palestine, had just been stoned to death by the council and elders and scribes for publically sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so, we open today by overlapping the end of our text from last week with the first verse of our text for today.

*And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.* Acts 8:1-4

Notice that these words begin with persecution and ends with proclamation and these words tell us that the proclamation was due to the persecution. It was because of the persecution that arose over Stephen that the first followers of Jesus Christ were compelled to leave Jerusalem, “*scattering*” out into the areas of Judea and Samaria, “*preaching the word*” of God, the good news of the gospel of Jesus, all according to the prophetic Spirit-empowered words of Jesus in Acts 1:8: “*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*” It’s here we also see the sovereign power of God in the truth of God’s Word in Romans 8:28 that “*for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose*” as God providentially used the stoning of Stephen and the zealous persecution of Saul to force the church out of Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria, so that the witness of the Spirit in the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ would be proclaimed “*to the end of the earth.*” God has divinely designed His power to be released in the lives of His people through the means of their pain and struggle and suffering and brokenness.

*Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So, there was much joy in that city. Acts 8:5-8*

Here we read that Philip, who along with Stephen and five other men, had been appointed by the apostles to serve food to the Greek-speaking Christian widows who *had not* been born in Palestine, went down to “*the city of Samaria*” and “*proclaimed*” the gospel of Jesus “*Christ.*” Take note that while Stephen and Phillip had been chosen and called to serve food to widows in the church, they still lived out the greater calling to be a witness for Jesus, which every follower of Christ is called to, every moment of every day of our lives here on earth. Stephen is known today, not so much that he served food to widows, but that he was stoned to death for publically sharing the gospel of our Lord Christ. In the same way, Phillip is historically not known so much as a food server as he is an evangelist. We begin to see that in our text for today, but in the future, he would become much more so, as in Acts 21:8 we read Phillip ultimately became widely known as “*Phillip the evangelist.*”

And so, what we read here today is that Phillip, who was a Greek-speaking Jew who *had not* been born in Palestine, who had been appointed by the leadership of the first church in Jerusalem, is one of the many who left Jerusalem because of the execution of Stephen and the aggressive persecution of Saul, was “*scattered*” to “*the city of Samaria.*” Historically we know Samaria was the capital of the ten northern tribes, called Israel, during the period of the divided Kingdom (926-721 B.C.). The city of Samaria was located on 20 acres of land, some 40 miles north of Jerusalem. Samaria was where Ahab married Jezebel, who introduced God's people to the worship of Baal. In the times of the New Testament Herod the Great built a temple in Samaria to Caesar Augustus, who was worshiped there as a god. Samaria was also a popular destination for Persian sorcerers who came in to set up shop there. The Samaritan people themselves were a mixture of the remnant of the power class left behind to work the land as farmers when Israel was taken into captivity by the Assyrians, and the ethnically foreign people the Assyrians brought in to replace the Israelites who had been taken captive. Samaritans were considered to be unclean “half-breeds” by the Jewish population.

And so, when Phillip was scattered to Samaria it would have been a city filled with a lot of religious folks who were influenced by Baal worship, Roman gods, sorcerers. Quite a handful for this witnessing food-server from Jerusalem. We read that Philip began his witnessing to the Samaritans by proclaiming to them that Jesus was “*the Christ*”, the Messiah. He would have used the Pentateuch (the five books of Moses), which the Samaritans recognized, and he would have focused on the passages which talked about the promised Savior to come, of which there are 456 references in the Old Testament, 75 of which are contained in the Pentateuch. We don't know which texts Philip used, but we do know the witness of Phillip's witness powerfully changed hearts and lives. We read that Spirit of God blessed them with unity (“*the crowds with one accord paid attention*”) and with faith, deliverance and healing (“*they heard him and saw the signs that he did. For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed*”) and with the joy of grateful worship (“*there was much joy in that city*”). Amen!

*But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is the power of God that is called Great.” And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed. Acts 8:9-13*

Luke, the writer of Acts, now moves from the witness of Philip's proclamation to the Samaritans to his encounter with one Samaria's leading citizens. It's here, as we have seen before, how the evil one can and will sow seeds of evil and human depravity in the hearts of followers of Jesus Christ in the church. This is the third occasion in the book of Acts when we find the sprouting of evil weeds among the wheat of God's people. The first was the story of Ananias and Sapphira, who manifested hypocrisy, even though they were born-again Christians. The second was the discontent and dissension caused by those who murmured and complained about the distribution of food to the widows. The third we see today is this manifestation of a counterfeit faith among the people of God.

We read that there was a prominent man in the city of Samaria whose name is "*Simon*." We are told that he had "*previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great*." It seems that everyone "*from the least to the greatest*" looked up to Simon saying, "*This man is the power of God that is called Great*" not only because Simon told them he was great but also because "*he had amazed them with his magic*." But that all seemed to change when those in the city who heard Phillip "*as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ*" believed and they were baptized, "*both men and women*." And amazing enough, even Simon the magician himself believed and was also baptized. Luke tells us that Simon "*continued*" to spend time with Philip; "*seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed*." At this point it sure *seems* like Simon had just gone through a true conversion experience.

*Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. Acts 8:14-17*

News of the movement of the Spirit through the witness of Philip's proclamation reaches Jerusalem and the apostles, cognizant of the reality that the evil one is planting weeds in the church and that Saul is trying to destroy the church, sent Peter and John to verify the legitimacy of the work of the Spirit in the witness of Christ in the first church in Samaria. When they arrived there, they found the work of the Spirit was lacking, for the Spirit "*had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus*." In response to this the apostles "*laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit*." And so, what does it mean that the Spirit "*had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus*"? What were they missing: the filling of the Spirit or the baptism of the Spirit? There are many opinions about what this means, but I am leaning toward the side of what the Bible says is it means.

Back in Acts 1:5 Jesus told his disciples: "*You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now*" and then in Acts 2:4 when Pentecost came, the disciples there "*were all filled with the Holy Spirit*." In looking at those verses in the context of Acts and the context of God's Word we learned 1) that being "*filled with the Spirit*" is the experience of coming to know the fullness of God's Spirit, which is an experience we are all to pursue throughout all our lives; and 2) that being "*baptized with the Holy Spirit*" is the experience by which the Spirit of Christ calls, places and empowers his followers into his body for his purpose. Now we know that the Jewish Christians who were "*filled with the Holy Spirit*" at Pentecost were also "*baptized with the Holy Spirit*" because they gave evidence of both: they were "*filled with the Holy Spirit*" because they were putting their faith in Jesus Christ, and they had been "*baptized with the Holy Spirit*" because they were sharing their faith in Jesus and living together with spiritual depth and relational vitality seen in their sacrificial giving of themselves to Jesus and to one another and to others. And so, in the context of what has come before our text for today, we again ask the question: What were the Samaritans missing – the filling of the Spirit or the baptism of the Spirit? Since Acts 8:12 tells us they "*believed*" in the gospel, they were then "*filled with the Holy Spirit*" which means they were not "*baptized with the Holy Spirit*."

Why were those who came to faith in Samaria not *“baptized with the Holy Spirit”* like those in the early church before them? Why would God *fill them with the Spirit* so they would experience the fullness of God’s Spirit when they came to faith in Christ, but not baptize them with the Spirit so they could experience the Spirit of Christ calling and placing and empowering followers of Christ into the body of Christ for the purpose of Christ? Well, those questions can be answered by asking another question: How could these two opposing peoples, the Jews and the Samaritans, become one in Christ? The answer is – God withheld the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the experience of the Spirit of Christ calling and placing and empowering followers of Christ into the body of Christ for the purpose of Christ - until He could send the apostles to Samaria to pray for and lay hands on these once-hated half-breeds and welcome them into the body of Christ. God sovereignly waited to give any manifestation of the full power of the Holy Spirit until some of the apostles could be present, so there would be no question at all that the Samaritans had received the new covenant empowering of the Holy Spirit in the same way that the Jewish Christians had. This would show that the Samaritans should be counted as full members of the one true church, the new covenant community of God’s people, founded and based at that time in Jerusalem. On that day, the Samaritan followers of Jesus Christ experienced what we know today in Jesus Christ, which Paul spoke of in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13: *“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”*

*Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, “Give me this power also, so that anyone 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 neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.” And Simon answered, “Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.” Now when they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans. Acts 8:18-24*

We shouldn’t be surprised in what we are seeing in Simon here. We saw this counterfeit faith at work way back in Acts 8:9-11. What should surprise us is that Simon did not express a desire to obtain the power demonstrated by the signs and wonders performed by Philip. He was very eager, however, to obtain the power that he saw as a result of the laying on of hands by Peter and John. What was the difference? Well, while Luke tells us that Philip cast out demons and healed those who were paralyzed and lame, he does not tell us specifically what happened when Peter and John laid their hands on the new believers. Something spectacular must have occurred, or Simon would not have been so eager to obtain this power. It must have been similar to Pentecost, because when the apostles laid their hands on the Samaritan believers, they received the Holy Spirit. Simon’s counterfeit faith was revealed when he offered money to obtain the power to do what Peter and John had been doing. The authority and power of an apostle was restricted to Peter and John. Not even Philip had been given this kind of power. Simon’s counterfeit faith was also revealed in that he seemed to care little about the necessity of faith; rather he wanted to market the holy manifestations of the Spirit as a commodity to be bought and sold. What is implied when the gift of the Spirit is seen in this way, is that the gifts of the Spirit are a matter of works, not of grace. Salvation cannot be earned or bought or sold. The seriousness of Simon’s counterfeit faith is indicated by the severity of Peter’s response to Simon’s request: *“May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.”*

We face the question today as to whether Simon was truly saved. Simon's response to the apostle Peter's rebuke is less than encouraging: *"Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."* Simon does not seem to be concerned with the fact that he has sinned as he is about the consequences of his sin. One could argue even believers feel this way at times. But what is more revealing is that he does not express any concern for the impact of his sin on his relationship with the Lord; instead, he only seems only to be concerned about suffering the penalty for his sin. True followers of Jesus Christ are cognizant about how what they think, say and do affects their relationship with Jesus because the indwelling Spirit keeps them aware of their need for God.

*Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.*

Acts 8:26-40

After having been "scattered" by the stoning of Stephen and the persecution of Saul so he would proclaim Christ in Samaria, the Spirit of God once again "scattered" Phillip to proclaim Christ in Gaza. What stands out in this story is that a very unlikely candidate for conversion to Christ is found and converted through the supernatural leading of the Lord himself. God sends an angel to tell Phillip where to go. Phillip goes, not knowing all that God has in mind. Out of all the tens of thousands of Jews and Gentiles and Samaritans that need Christ, the Lord sovereignly sets his favor on a man from Ethiopia in Africa who had traveled over 500 miles to all the way up to Jerusalem to worship God – and so when Phillip gets to Gaza he sees that man in a chariot. The Spirit tells Phillip, *"Go over and join this chariot."* The timing of the Spirit is perfect as at that very moment Phillip, no doubt wondering what he would do or say when he got to the chariot, hears the Ethiopian reading out loud the book of Isaiah, specifically where the prophet speaks to the promised Messiah which Jesus had fulfilled in his death. The man asks Phillip if he knows who Isaiah is speaking of. Phillip shares the gospel of Jesus Christ with the Ethiopian, who then believes and asks to be baptized, after which Phillip was miraculously transported by the Spirit like Elijah to Azotus, and as Phillip *"passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea."* Our text for today reveals to us that it's by the sovereign hand of God that the scattering of God's Word empowers the witness of the Spirit in followers of Jesus Christ. In God's economy fired elevator operators can become dynamic evangelists. Persecution produces proclamation. Food servers who proclaim the gospel could be stoned to death or they could bring entire populations of marginalized people to faith in Christ. The Word of God has the power to lead people to Jesus. When we are sensitive and obedient to the Spirit, He will lead us to those who desperately need Jesus so that we might passionately proclaim the glory of God in Christ for the joy of all people!