

Acts 8:1b-25: Witnesses In All Judea and Samaria I: Samaritans

Introduction:

Well, friends, we're back in Acts. Having talked about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the last week of his life before his life was restarted in Easter, we're back to talking about all the stuff that happened so soon after his resurrection.

Last time we were in Acts Stephen was stoned after having told the good news about God's faithfulness in a way that condemned the religious elite for their own faithlessness.

The priests took off their cloaks, so they could get a better throw in, you know, when they were stoning Stephen. And they entrusted the pile to a man named Saul, to make sure no immoral thieves stole their stuff while they stoned this guy.

Saul, who we'll learn more about soon, is on board with Stephen's punishment. He's a champion of doctrinal purity, theologically correct practice. And he's out to end the Church, which is not recognized for what it is: Not just some sect of Judaism, but

something different, new.

In every society, if those who are recognized as its leaders are violent, it empowers others to violence. If our guides kill and harass, then we learn to do the same from them. And so, when Jerusalem's priests kill Stephen, well...everyone follows suit.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

Saul was a witness, and enabler, and now he's an agent of persecution. Some of Jesus' followers stick around, risking their bodies to bury Stephen's and to ritually mourn him, but most of the Church runs. And as they spread out into Judea and Samaria, they begin to make good on Jesus' prophetic mandate that his followers will bear witness to him "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Today we're moving away from Acts emphasis on Jerusalem, and into its smaller emphasis on Judea and Samaria.

Let's pray.

Prayer:

On Judea & Samaria:

In the first century, Judea was one of many Roman provinces that covered the same geographical space as ancient Israel. The province lined up, more or less, with what the Old Testament calls Judah, territory that was historically inhabited by the descendants of one of Jacob's sons, Judah. Jerusalem was in Judah or Judea, so was Bethlehem; its eastern border was made up of the River Jordan, of the Dead Sea. Galilee was another of these Roman provinces. It was far north, where Jesus' home was. In between Galilee and Judea was Samaria, and Samaria was a problem for Israel.

At one point in history, Israel was two kingdoms; the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom, Samaria in the north, Judah in the South. Although Israelites from both places were eventually sent into Exile, Judah wasn't exiled for a couple hundred years

after Samaria was. Judah had revivals during that time; found lost copies of the Torah, had dozens of prophets speak to them, prophets whose words and prophecies became Scripture. They rebuilt their identity as God's People--for awhile, before they lost the plot, too. During those years, whatever Israelites were left in Samaria floundered. By the time of Acts, Samaritans are worse than Gentiles to your average Israelite. They are something different. They don't have the same Bible as Israelites have, they don't have the same understandings about God, they're not ethnically pure, but have married around, and had mixed-race babies, which was considered terrible by, oh, Israelite Supremacists. Israelites lived in provinces all around the place, but they didn't live in Samaria. It was dead to them.

Geographic and Sociological:

If we think of Jesus' prophetic mandate as one that spreads geographically, it makes perfect sense for Jesus to tell his followers to testify first in Jerusalem, then in Judea, then out toward Samaria, before going even farther. But we can also think of the way Jesus' followers interacted with these places, too, as religious and cultural insiders in Jerusalem and Judea, but as religious and cultural antagonists in Samaria. To any

Roman, there would be no difference at all between a Judean or Galilean and a Samaritan. To one of these Israelites, though, a Samaritan would have been dirty. Whatever label we humans use: filth, betrayer, savage, dirty, unsafe not only culturally, but a heretic, to boot, whose ideas and ways are contagiously bad. Even though from a ten foot distance any of us wouldn't know the difference. We don't let them touch us, much less marry our children.

And they're worse than Gentiles, because they are so close. They're descendants of Abraham...and so the fact that they're so wrong about God just makes it worse for us, right? If we're Israelites and Samaritans come up in conversation, that is. Imagine how mad you get when your parents or your children disagree with you politically or religiously. When your best friend won't see one important thing the same way you see it, it's infuriating. And there are no feuds worse than family feuds.

But, but the Church has embodied some of Jesus' stuff, now, you know? They've got the Spirit, whose leading them into living out what Jesus taught them. And Jesus himself interacted with the Samaritans; his greatest story of mercy starred a Samaritan. So, there's

precedent for those who follow Jesus to engage with Samaritans in a way that is more about God's love, than our internalized disgust and hate.

Salted in Samaria:

And so the Church is scattered out, running away from harassment and fearing death, and Philip runs with them. Philip was one of the leaders of the Church, managing the Church's organizational life, chosen alongside Stephen. We read:

4 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.

But those who are racing away from Jerusalem, fearing for their lives, they don't do what you'd think they do, which is keep what they are, who they are, secret. Instead, wherever they go, they proclaim, preach, present the truth about who Jesus is and what God has

done for the world.

That truth is seen in the miracles that they offer those who listen. This isn't always the case in the New Testament. It is in this moment. And Philip ends up in a city down in the plains of Samaria, we don't know which one, and brings joy through his healing. They pay close attention to what he tells them about God's Messiah. They believe him. The signs and wonders and healings help. And they're baptized. Philip sends word back to Jerusalem that the Samaritans have accepted the truth about Jesus, and the Apostles send Peter and John.

They send Peter and John because Peter and John need to do what is called, theologically, confirmation. The apostles lay hands on those who were baptized, pray for them, and confirm that the Spirit is at work in the person's life. In some cases in the New Testament, like today, it's that mutual moment of confirmation, in which the person submits to the prayer of the Apostle, and the Apostle prays for the person, that invites in the Holy Spirit in new and powerful ways. Other times, you know, we see the Spirit come on people as soon as they trust in the message they hear. It's all very untidy, really. But the Apostles show up to lay hands

on these baptized Samaritans, pray for them, and open their lives up to receive the Spirit. This is critical for them, because without the Spirit they have no power to live that Jesus-obeying life that they've committed too. Whatever else we see, and we see all sorts of weird things, confirmation always follows baptism in the New Testament.

Simon the Sorcerer, Simon Magus, Mr. Awesome:

But there's a new Samaritan believer who has been baptized. His name is Simon. He's been nicknamed "God's Great Power!" by his neighbors, literally, "Awesome!" And Awesome has a following. He's been given the name because he can apparently do amazing things. He's great at selling himself, too. And these amazing things are somehow attributed to God, by him or others. The word the NIV translates as "sorcerer" to describe him is the word we use when we talk about the "Wise men," the "Magi" at Christmastime. Simon may have power of some kind; where we gets it we don't know. He may have been a savvy trickster. He may have been promoting himself as a kind of Messiah for the Samaritans, a wise man. Sorcery, magic, was something condemned in the Old Testament, because it was considered an abuse of

creation. Of trying to manipulate the created order in a way that only God was empowered to do. We'll see in Acts 13 another confrontation between this illegitimate power and God's power.

But even Simon, "God's Great Power," has believed Philip and been baptized. More than others, he's amazed at the miracles and proofs that Philip backs up his message with.

Simon's amazement makes sense in every way: His identity, down to his name, has become centered on what he can do with his powers. If it's a scam of some sort, he's overwhelmed by the real power he sees in Philip. If it's not a scam, he's overwhelmed by the greater power that Philip shows.

Request & Rebuke:

When John and Peter arrive to lay hands on everyone, and they receive the Holy Spirit, which apparently happens in a noteworthy way, this happens:

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.”

We get that this is ridiculous. We know it is, right? But we have to see the drama in this. Peter’s name was Simon before Jesus renamed him “Peter.” Peter was always sticking his foot in his mouth before the Holy Spirit came upon him. This is a battle of Simons, Simon the Sorcerer and Simon Peter. The Apostles themselves, and Peter particularly, acted now and then as gatekeepers to Jesus, and were always condemned for it, just as Simon Peter now condemns Simon the Sorcerer for his desire to dole out access to God. Simon Peter had no money, but what he had he offered: healing to someone who needed. Simon the Sorcerer had money, and what he wanted to do was buy what he could to gather more for himself.

In some ways, it’s a battle of Simon Peter with a version of his past self, his past way of relating to God. We read this:

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.

Wait, what?

Here's what I love: There's no real ending to this scene. Did Peter and John pray for Simon? What happened?

We don't know. People filled in the gaps, of course. People always have. Simon the Sorcerer, who is often called Simon Magus by religious historians, became a character that people wrapped myth and story around. An entire religious sect named themselves after him, although all we really know about their views are what others condemned. The Church made up a word, over

time, called “Simony” from “Simon” which means, basically, buying or selling churchy privileges and access for personal gain.

But we have no idea, no idea at all how Simon’s story ends. We only have the warning that he was given. And it’s weird to me that Peter says Simon is “full of bitterness and captive to sin.” Why not, say, “full of greed” or “full of jealousy?” That seems to make more sense to me.

And yet: Bitterness is what we feel when we feel we haven’t gotten what we deserve, have had something taken from us or withheld from us that, if the world were fair, we’d have. Simon the Sorcerer’s identity has become so wrapped up in the lie that he is “Mr. Awesome,” “God’s great power,” that to have God’s real power show up and take away his prestige, take away the esteem and honor that his followers and community has given him, it has left him bitter.

And yet, to follow Christ is to give up whatever it is in the world that has gained us esteem and honor. And this is a matter of the heart. Because of course; Philip, Peter, John, they’re super-famous, now, right? Samaritans are loving them. They’re impressive, and

showered in honor and esteem, but unlike Simon the Sorcerer, whose “heart isn’t right before God,” the praise of the people around them just doesn’t matter to them. It’s irrelevant in light of God’s praise. This is the same attitude Saul, who will become Paul, will have when he says, about the Apostles in Jerusalem, “as to whatever they are, it makes no difference to me. God doesn’t show favoritism.”

Pathetic & Interesting:

Simon Magus, Simon the Sorcerer, he didn’t think before he offered Peter and John cash for confirmation. He just saw something he wanted, something that lined up really well with his own sense of who he was, and offered to buy it. He wanted to shore up the esteem of others, which had nothing to do with God, by using God’s power. You can’t do that. You can’t use God’s power to protect that which has nothing to do with God.

But it’s a very, oh, human thing to do. It’s something anyone with money does, without even realizing it. We treat God’s power as a resource, a resource to be used for our good. Simon self-interestedly valued the esteem and honor of his community, which his sense of identity was built on. He wanted to use God as a

resource to shore up what he self-interestedly valued. And with the normal, boring blindness of someone who has power and cash, he thought he could buy this thing he wanted.

This is what makes Simon so pathetic and so interesting at the same time. Simon's sin isn't all that newsworthy. He's just another guy who wants to use God for himself. Just another person with money who thinks they can buy what they want, and intends to use what they buy to impress their neighbors. Just another baptized person whose values haven't changed after their baptism, whose identity is still back there, back before they committed to follow Christ, instead of truly settled in what God says about them. He's just another person whose story doesn't have an ending.

And history wrote endings for him that were all made up, because we were desperate to know: Did he change his life? Did he live and thrive? Did he receive the Spirit that he longed for, and treat his relationship with God as a relationship, or as a tool to get the honor and esteem of people? What happened to him? And we want to know, because we get what it's like to be him. We get failure. We know what it means to

forget what it meant to follow God, and give up an old way of life for a new one. We know what it's like to be more Simon the Sorcerer and Simon Magus than Peter, John, and Philip.

We want Simon's story to end well because we want our own to end well.

Conclusion: Circumstances

What do we see in today's passage? So much more than I can mention.

We see God using circumstances, even challenging, terrifying ones to build the Church, to put people in unique places where they can uniquely bear witness to people, can learn to trust God in deeper ways than they have before. We can ask what challenging circumstances we ourselves face, what is it we need to remember to be brave, to act for God in the midst of them?

Conclusion: Enemies

We see Jesus destroying deep-rooted, persistent ideas about who enemies and friends are. The Church flees-- runs away--to the places and the people that before Jesus it would have considered untouchable and

contagious, worse than dirt, and worth less. We can ask who are our Samaritans? Who are those who are just like us in every way, except that difference we have decided is the most important? If we don't recognize that we're all equal in Christ, then we are actually the ones who are guilty and acting shamefully, not those who we've always been disinterested in or disturbed by.

Conclusion: God's Untidiness

We see how untidy the early Church was. How untidy the Holy Spirit has always been. We see how quickly our perfect systems of how God must work fall apart in the face of outliers. We see mysterious things; a world less driven by orderly science, with dark magic, and powers that are conflict with God. And we see God's power at work for God's good and God's People. We could ask why we are so dismayed by what we can't completely understand when it comes to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

Conclusion: Held Captive in Routine Sin:

And we can ask this: In what ways are our own sins holding us captive? In what ways are our hearts not right with God? Here's the rub: They are almost certainly the simple, boring ways of Sorcerer Simon.

Operating with a worldview that believes we can get what we want when we want for the reasons we want, none of which make any reference to Christ.

Neglecting the basics. Letting our regular, old, vanilla-sin erode away the Spirit's power: Simple laziness, normal jealousy, typical self-interest drives us to neglect prayer, or generosity, or worship, or showing up with character when what we need to give is our character and our presence.

If we don't have the eyes to see our own casual, typical sin, or the ways our hearts aren't right with God, then pray that someone might reveal to us the ways we ourselves fall short of our own ideal. Pray that someone will pray for us that we survive our own failures.

Our endings are not given. What will be true of each of us in a few years or a few decades is unknown. Simon's failures linger, but if we can see the way God can make good out of all our circumstances, the way God can turn enemies into friends, and can do it all in ways we can't always explain or understand, then perhaps we can also turn away from the very-relatable sin of Simon, and reset our hearts in Christ, so that our choices follow suit.