

THURSDAY 30 June 2022 "Simon the Sorcerer" (Acts 8:9-16)

Good morning my "Walking with Jesus" friends,

I wonder if you've heard the phrase 'hero worship'? We see it all around us, no matter where you live in the world. Celebrity status for athletes or musicians or movie stars or politicians can bring with it 'hero worship'. Famous people are 'famous' because of the attention they draw for what they've done and often that attention can go beyond respect or beyond popularity to a level of these hero's being worshipped by their fans and followers. Have you seen it?

In our ongoing journey through the months and first few years following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, there were people of the first century who similarly were very influential, with great hero followings. Certainly, the Roman Caesar was one, and even Jesus, in His few short years in the public eye, was becoming a celebrity. Most heroes, after they die, are remembered and often enshrined in various honoring ways...they become historic figures. But for Jesus it was entirely different. *Jesus followers insisted Jesus was fully alive, resurrected from the dead, and Jesus had returned to heaven from where Jesus was actively involved in what was going on here on earth!*

Jesus followers claimed Jesus had sent the Holy Spirit of God from heaven to earth, to live IN, guide and empower every person who had trusted Jesus to be their Savior from their sin bondage. This was part of the 'good news', the "Gospel" which was being taught by those men who had been with Jesus daily, His disciples, who were now known as the '**apostles**', which means 'sent ones', because Jesus had sent them out to tell His story to the world. In the past several days we've been walking with them through the record of Dr. Luke in the book of Acts in the Bible.

Today we encounter another famous person of that era, '**Simon the Samaritan sorcerer!**' Acts 8:9 reports: ***"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, and all the people, both influential and ordinary, gave Simon their attention and exclaimed, 'This man is rightly called 'the Great Power of God'. They followed Simon the sorcerer, because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery."*** (Acts 8:9-11)

In our day around the world there are probably two major types of 'magic'. One type is really 'illusion', which is a skill developed over many years by those often called magicians or illusionists.

By 'sleight of hand' they can make things seemingly appear and disappear, right before your eyes. Have you ever watched a 'magic show' and been awed by what you saw, unable to understand how it could possibly happen, yet you watched it with your own eyes?

The power of these skillful people is their ability to manipulate and distract and conceal very carefully so as we watch them, we don't see ALL that is actually happening because it's an illusion. What we think we see is not what is actually happening.

The other type of 'magic' is far more dangerous. This was the 'magic' of Simon the sorcerer. *This 'magic' is accomplished by spiritual powers we cannot see. This is the magic of sorcery, the occult, accomplished when a person is empowered by spirits of the dark kingdom to accomplish 'miraculous', unexplainable things.* This man Simon was one of these people, who had for many years been empowered by spirits which would accomplish amazing things through him. He had become famous, and he had a huge following of amazed people. As Philip came to Samaria, the miracles Philip was doing, and the story of Jesus Philip was proclaiming, were entirely different from what Simon had been doing. Philip was a follower of Jesus and one of the 7 men commissioned as Deacons in Acts 6:5. Philip had fled Jerusalem when a great persecution broke out against Jesus' followers.

The Holy Spirit of God was guiding Philip in what to say and accomplishing miracles through Philip in Samaria. People were attracted by the miracles and listened to Philip speak of Jesus and many Samaritans trusted in Jesus to be their Savior and they were baptized. *What had happened in Jerusalem was now happening in this city in Samaria. The "Jesus movement" had moved into Samaria, as Jesus had promised before He ascended back to heaven.*

Acts 8:13 is an amazing statement, do you see it in your Bible? **"Simon the sorcerer himself believed in Jesus and was baptized! And Simon followed Philip, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw."** Perhaps for the first time in his life Simon the sorcerer magician was watching a 'magic' display by Philip that he could not explain. *It wasn't illusion, and it wasn't sorcery, and so Simon was confused. As far as he knew there was no other type of miracle or magic.* But Simon couldn't deny what he was seeing. Crippled people were being healed, and blind people were seeing for the first time in their lives. *No magical potions were being used, only great faith in the powerful name of Jesus and Philip's explanation of the true identity of Jesus and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.*

This city in Samaria was being turned upside down by Philip's words and miracles! News spread quickly and very soon Jerusalem was hearing about it, and the apostles decided to send Peter and John to investigate.

They had prayed over Philip and commissioned him as a Deacon and they knew Philip had fled Jerusalem persecution going into Samaria, but these reports of what was happening there needed to be confirmed. *For most Jews it was unthinkable that God would duplicate among Samaritans what He was doing in Jerusalem with Jews.* Why?

Even for the apostles, who had been with Jesus those few days in Sychar, Samaria (John 4) and watched an entire Samaritan town changed by Jesus' presence and words... still *it was unthinkable that Jesus would include Samaritans in this great "Jesus movement" of Jewish people finding new life through salvation by Jesus!*

So, Peter and John went to Samaria to see for themselves. When they arrived, they were astonished that it did appear these Samaritans had legitimately trusted in the truth about Jesus just as the Jews had. They had been baptized in the name of Jesus just as the believing Jews in Jerusalem. **But something was missing.** *Unlike the Jews in Jerusalem, there had been no spectacular Pentecost arrival of the Holy Spirit in Samaria, and these Samaritan followers of Jesus, even though baptized by Philip, in the name of Jesus, showed no evidence the Holy Spirit of God was within them?* Why not?

This is another 'defining moment' in the remarkable story of Jesus and the spread of His Gospel around the world. The disciples and close followers of Jesus had all been Jews. Jesus was born into the Jewish line of King David. Jesus was declared to be the Jewish Messiah, and *even though Jesus had repeatedly said His salvation would be available to ALL people, EVERYONE, ANYONE who believed in Him...* the Jews who heard Jesus and put their trust in Him believed Jesus meant only ALL Jews, EVERY Jew, ANYWHERE in the world Jewish people lived. Samaritans were not pure blood Jews; their Jewish heritage had been defiled by forced intermarriage with peoples from other lands 700 years before when that part of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians. (2 Kings 17:24) Therefore, IF Jesus' salvation was available to ALL Jews, certainly the Samaritans were NOT eligible... so the Jerusalem Jewish Christians believed very strongly. Can we understand Peter & John's dilemma?

In our day we often hear words like 'racism', 'prejudice', 'bigotry', 'ethnic pride', even 'ethnic cleansing'. If you thought those words represent only a modern day racial or ethnic prejudice problem, oh my friends here in Acts 8 we are standing right in the middle of full blown racial, religious, ethnic prejudice and bigotry! *Jesus had made it clear, very clear, that He had come, lived His life, taught God's truth, died on the cross, rose again victorious over death SO THAT His salvation could be offered to every person in the entire world of every generation with NO restrictions.* Jesus meant exactly this when He had made the most famous statement of all time: ***"For God so loved the WORLD that He sent His only Son, that WHOEVER believes in Him shall not perish but will have eternal life."*** (John 3:16) Do you see it my friends? **"World"** means exactly that... every place where human beings live! **"WHOEVER"** means exactly that... every human being.

I say it again, *EVERY human being is eligible to be saved by Jesus. But even the apostles didn't believe that.* They strongly felt God's offer of salvation was ONLY for Jews and primarily for Jews living in Israel. *So, what would Jesus have to do, through the guidance and teaching of the Holy Spirit, to convince Peter and John and all the apostles and all the Jewish followers of Jesus that the Gospel is for all people, including the Samaritans against whom they had such a deeply rooted prejudice?*

Let's pause right here friends and be honest with ourselves. Is there any prejudice in us? As we look at people do we sometimes categorize them in our minds and *is it possible we put some people in the category of 'unredeemable'*, for whatever reason? Is it possible we write people off as impossible to ever be saved by Jesus because. . .? I wonder what your 'because' is? Tomorrow we'll see what happened in Samaria and how significant it is for you and me today, no matter where you live in the world. For today, do you really believe the Gospel of Jesus is for EVERYONE, everywhere?

Today's Scripture is Acts 8:9-16.