

WEEKEND Edition 02/03 July 2022 "Heart Choices" (Acts 8:18-24)

Hello my "Walking with Jesus" friends,

As we head into this first weekend of July, *I wonder what battles rage for control of your heart?* Is it fear of the unknown future? Might it be anxiety about economic instability? Perhaps it is the unreliability of people and their promises? Maybe it's woundedness from your past. *The truth is, my friends, for all of us there are things working hard to rob us of the joy, the peace, the contentment, the fulfillment in life which God has designed us for and Jesus offers to help us find.*

Join me back in a city in Samaria, about 2000 years ago, as a great move of the Holy Spirit of God is drawing many people to Jesus and there is **'great joy'** in this unnamed city. (Acts 8:8) It has all happened because a man named Philip, who was one of the 7 deacons commissioned by the apostles to serve the needs of widows and others, suddenly found himself confronted with great persecution against the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. This persecution rose up after Stephen, another of those 7 deacons, was brutally martyred. *Suddenly Jerusalem was not a safe place to be for anyone enjoying a relationship with Jesus!* Philip had fled Jerusalem, leaving his home behind and gone north into the province of Samaria, a place Philip would normally not be welcome as Jewish man. But undeniably the Holy Spirit had led Philip there and immediately he began speaking to people about Jesus and doing occasional miracles. Many people were drawn to Jesus and trusted in Him for their salvation and Philip was having a wonderful time seeing this city turned into a place of great joy, according to Acts 8:8.

Yesterday we saw that even one of the most influential, powerful men of the region, Simon the Samaritan sorcerer had trusted in the truth of Jesus and been baptized. Peter and John had come from Jerusalem to evaluate what was happening here, *confused because none of the apostles believed Jesus' salvation was intended by God to be brought to the Samaritans.* But as we saw yesterday, God made it very clear that He had sent Jesus to proclaim God's truth and accomplish the Redemption mission *making forgiveness for sin possible for all, God's forgiveness was NOT to be restricted only to Jews.* God really did want ALL people to find new life in a restored relationship with Him through Jesus. The Holy Spirit had come upon the Samaritan believers and this city was experiencing very much what Jerusalem had experienced. A spiritual awakening was underway with great power and excitement.

We don't know how long Peter and John stayed in this city, but I'm sure they remained long enough to do some extensive teaching about the Jesus they had known so well. The Jesus John had watched die as he stood at the cross with Jesus' mother.

The resurrected Jesus both Peter and John had seen several times during those 40 days between Jesus' resurrection and ascension. Hour after hour, day and night, *I can well imagine Peter and John were answering questions and telling the stories and explaining the deeper things Jesus had taught them.* OH, my friends, can you imagine what these days were like for the people of that Samaritan town?

I also imagine Peter and John had long conversations with Simon the Samaritan sorcerer who had believed Philip and trusted in Jesus. Did he really understand what he had done? Was it legitimate? Did he understand the significance of his water baptism? But most of all. . . **Simon had to make a very important decision.** *He could not be faithful to Jesus, honoring to Jesus, developing his new relationship with Jesus as his Lord and Savior, while at the same time continuing his mystical, sorcerer, magical work under the strong influence of dark, evil spirits.* Simon the sorcerer would have to choose... one path or the other; one spiritual relationship or the other; one Lord of his life or the other. Jesus had once made a very powerful statement, that I'm sure Peter and John repeated to Simon the sorcerer: **"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."** (Matt. 6:24)

Simon the Samaritan sorcerer had for many years been very popular and powerful in this region of Samaria. So, when he saw how the Holy Spirit had come on these Samaritan believers, when Peter and John laid their hands on them and prayed over them, Simon said to them: **"Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."** (Acts 8:19) It seems Simon saw this as another opportunity for making money, but I'm not sure it was as much about the money as it was the fame, the popularity, and even more power this new mystical ability might bring him. Remember, people had been so amazed by Simon and his sorcery for so long that they called him **"The Great power of God"** (Acts 8:10)

Once again Peter was faced with a challenge to protect the purity of what God was doing in this Jesus movement, this time in a Samaritan city. Then as now there were lots of people looking for ways to distort, to profit from a spiritual movement, so Peter challenged Simon the sorcerer with very strong words: **"May your money perish with you because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in hope that He may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."** (Acts 8:20-23)

Friends, I've often wondered if Peter was so bold, so harsh with Ananias and Sapphira and now with Simon the sorcerer *because he knew his own heart.* He had more than once argued with Jesus. He had actually denied Jesus 3 times on the night Jesus was being tried before His crucifixion. Peter wrestled with pride and unforgiveness and impatience and other things which so easily can get us drawn off the path Jesus is trying to guide us to walk with Him.

The writer to the Hebrews says it this way: **"Since we're surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus..."** (Hebrews 12:1,2) Peter was really working hard at learning how to do this and I think he saw that Simon the sorcerer was still deeply rooted in his long history of partnership with the dark kingdom in manipulating people with his sorcery for profit. While Simon had taken steps toward trusting Jesus and even been baptized, oh my that old sinful past of his had very powerful and deep roots in Simon the sorcerer. Simon begged Peter to pray for him so that he might find victory and break the chains of his dark past as he grew in a relationship with Jesus.

Luke doesn't tell us any more about Simon, so we don't know the rest of his story, but it appears after a while Peter and John felt the need to return to Jerusalem to give a full report to the other apostles of what God was doing in Samaria. *It would be a remarkable report, for God had made it clear the salvation experience of the Samaritans was legitimate and God had opened the kingdom of God not only to repentant Jews, but also now repentant Samaritans.* We can imagine the apostles and Jewish Jesus followers in Jerusalem really struggled accepting Peter and John's message. For hundreds of years the bitterness, prejudice and near hatred that existed caused Jews and Samaritans to have nothing to do with each other. No business dealings, no marriages, not even traveling into each other's territory. *But now God wanted them to understand that if HE was going to allow both Jews and Samaritans into His family, and if they were each and all purchased by the blood of Jesus and His terrible atonement death, then God wanted them to learn how to coexist as not only neighbors but actually extended family, the family of God, brothers and sisters in Christ!* Now that was going to take some work... on both sides of their border!

Let's pause here friends. Do you have anyone in your world that will take a miracle of God for you to love, even to get along with? Are there some deeply rooted attitudes only Jesus can help clean out of your heart? Let's take some time right now and talk with Jesus about this, asking Him to show us anything He'd like to purify out of our hearts. And here's a worship song to help us with this...

Today's Scripture is Acts 8:18-24.