

"The Gift That Couldn't Be Bought"
Sermon Series on *The Way of the Spirit*
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March 8, 2015
(Acts 8:2-25)

Introduction.

There's a story told in China of a man who raised horses for a living. One day one of his prized stallions ran away, and his neighbors gathered around to offer condolences over his loss. But the old man, being a wise person, said, "How do I know whether what has happened is actually good or bad? We shall wait and see."

A couple of days later, the stallion returned leading 6 other wild horses with him. The friends gathered once again, now in joy, and said, "Well, what a wonderful thing has happened. This is good. Who would have thought it possible?"

But the wise man said, "How do I know yet whether this is a good thing or a bad thing? We shall wait and see."

The next day the stallion kicked the man's son so hard that it broke the boy's leg. Friends gathered around a third time and said, "Oh, this is so sad what has happened to you."

But again, the wise old man responded, "How do I know whether it is good or bad? We shall wait and see."

It just so happened that the next day a war broke out in their part of the country, and the son with the broken leg was exempted from having to go into military service. The friends gathered around once again, and you can guess, the story went on and on.

So much of life depends on the way we look at our circumstances. What appears to be a blessing may actually be a curse, and what looks at first like an awful turn of events may prove to be the best thing that could have possibly happened.

This morning we look at a passage which tells the scattering of the early church because of a new wave of persecution. But the amazing reality is that what looked so bad in the beginning was actually God's blessing in disguise.

I. A New Wave Of Persecution.

The passage ends with a joyous event in which many people in Samaria begin to follow Jesus. But before this takes place, the text tells us, "***On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria***" (8:1). Try to imagine what this must have felt like to the early followers of Christ. In Acts 2 we read that the church was an exciting place to be. They were eating in one another's homes, no one had any financial needs, and they shared what they had with each other. In addition, they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to prayer. There was power in the early church, miracles took place, and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Oh sure, there had been a couple of problems along the way. Some of the Greek-speaking widows had been discriminated against, and two people battled pride that led to deception. But by and large, the early church was quite an amazing place.

Then the world changed. Stephen was martyred, and the authorities began to arrest Christians and throw them into jail. Everyone but the apostles had to leave Jerusalem, and the text says that Saul began to destroy the church. The whole experience must have been very frightening. The future looked bleak to everyone.

Have you ever had that happen to you? Things are going well, you can see the Lord working in your life, and you feel His power. Then your world starts to fall apart, and you wonder what went wrong. It feels like the wheels come off, and you spiral down in sadness and confusion. It's in times like these that we begin to doubt ourselves, and we begin to doubt God. I'm sure some of these early Christians did, too.

What could have been a shattering experience to the early followers of Christ proved to be the means by which God sent them out into the world to further His mission. Persecution took them to places they had already been told to go, but had not yet gone. You'll recall that Jesus told His disciples in the first chapter of the book of Acts they were to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth. Yet they were content to remain in Jerusalem where great things were going so great and life was good.

Who could blame them? Isn't that what we tend to do? Good things happen, we feel close to the Lord, and we want it to last forever. But God says, "No. I have another plan for you." And He moves us out.

When Jesus took Peter, James and John up the Mount of Transfiguration, the Bible tells us that the Lord was transformed before their eyes, and His clothes glowed brilliantly white. The disciples saw Christ speaking in this transfigured state with Moses, the great representative of the Old Testament law, and Elijah, the great representative of the prophets. When the visionary experience came to an end, Peter said to Jesus, "Let's stay here on this mountain, and let's build three shrines – one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He wanted the mountain top experience to last forever.

But Jesus said, "No, we must return to the valley." And when they went down, they encountered someone who needed them, misunderstanding, and the power of evil itself. How unsettling it must have been for the disciples. One minute they were caught up in worship with a heavenly vision, and the next they're back in the valley slugging it out with the Devil.

In what ways do you feel like God is tearing your world apart? How have the circumstances in recent days pushed you out of your comfort zone? Remember, the mountaintop experience is only meant to equip you to return to the valley and carry on God's mission of love in a broken world. The persecution of the early church was not shattering; it was scattering. And God used it as a part of His great plan to win the world to Christ.

II. A Question About The Holy Spirit.

The text goes on to tell us, "*Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. ...So there was great joy in that city*" (8:5,6,8). The word that is translated "proclaimed" literally means "to herald." Later on in this chapter Luke uses the Greek verb *euangelidzo* 5 times, which means "to bring good news." Philip the deacon became Philip the evangelist, and he shared Jesus with the Samaritans. The result was that many people came to know and follow Christ in that city.

Before Philip arrived, this town in Samaria had been under a very different kind of influence. A man named Simon practiced sorcery there, and he amazed the people of Samaria with his magical arts and extravagant claims. He boasted that he was someone great, perhaps even a god. Even Simon professed faith in Jesus Christ, and he wanted to embrace the good news of God's love.

When the apostles heard about the conversion of the Samaritans, they sent Peter and John to check things out. It was particularly appropriate that John should go since Luke relates in his gospel that on one occasion John asked Jesus if he should call down fire from heaven to consume a Samaritan city when the people there rejected the gospel (Lk. 9:51-56). The very disciple who previously wanted God to pour out His judgment on the Samaritans was there when God poured out His Spirit and His blessing instead.

When the apostles arrived, they discovered a problem. Even though the Samaritans had received both the gospel and Christian baptism, apparently they had not yet received the Holy Spirit. Peter and John placed their hands on them, prayed for them, and in answer to their prayers, the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit. Presumably this was confirmed by speaking in tongues as had occurred on the day of Pentecost back in Jerusalem.

New Testament scholar I. Howard Marshall suggests that this is perhaps the most extraordinary statement in the whole book of Acts.¹ You'll recall that Peter said in a previous sermon that the gift of the Spirit was available to all those who repented and were baptized (2:38). How, then, could the Samaritans have believed and been baptized and not receive the Spirit? The answer is what happened in Samaria was a new in-breaking of God's work in the world. The delay of the gift of the Holy Spirit there, which was accompanied by the speaking in tongues, is because this was the first occasion in which the gospel had been proclaimed not only outside Jerusalem but inside Samaria. And an act of authentication by the Holy Spirit was necessary in order to validate this new work of the Lord.

Remember, hostility existed between the Jews and the Samaritans for centuries, and a schism resulted because of their racial and theological differences. The animosity was intense. But now the Samaritans were responding to the gospel. It was a significant moment for the advancement of the Kingdom which also had the potential for significant problems.

What would happen now? Would the long-standing rift between Jews and Samaritans continue in the early church? Would the Samaritans be welcomed into the fellowship, or would Christ be torn apart into two different churches as a result? In order to avoid these problems, it seems the giving of the Holy Spirit was delayed in order to give the apostles the opportunity to be a part of the blessing. This would be the best way to bring unity to the body of Christ where there was potential for racial conflict.

This text reminds us that God has no favorite color. The Jews with their racial purity were no better than the Samaritans who intermarried and were racially mixed. The passage says that all people –black, white, red, yellow, and brown – belong in the kingdom of God.

I think each one of us battles against fear and prejudice that creeps into our hearts whenever we encounter people who are different from us. As Christians, we're called to repent of racism and prejudice in all its ugly forms. We're to remember that the Bible says in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free, black or white, young or old, rich or poor! Rather, we are all one in Christ Jesus our Lord, and we should strive to break down the walls that separate us.

III. The Gift That Couldn't Be Bought.

Next we read in verse 18 that when Simon saw that the Holy Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money in exchange for the power to impart the Spirit himself. Peter reprimanded Simon publicly for thinking that the gift of God could be bought. In addition, the apostle added that Simon could have no share in this ministry because his heart was not right before God, and he called Simon to repent and pray to the Lord. Peter also discerned that Simon's heart was full of bitterness, and he captive to sin.

We've all been tempted to bargain with God, haven't we? We think, "If I make this sacrifice for God, then He'll bless me." "If I work hard at living the Christian life, then God will protect my kids," or "He'll help me get good grades." The grace of God isn't something for which we can bargain. It's a free gift that is unmerited and undeserved.

Did you ever hear about the little boy who wanted a bike for Christmas in the worst way? So in desperation he took the statue of the Virgin Mary from the nativity scene in the crèche in their home, and he wrote a note to Jesus that read: "I'VE GOT YOUR MAMA. IF YOU WANT TO EVER SEE HER AGAIN, SEND THE BIKE. SIGNED, YOU KNOW WHO."

We can't bargain with God, and the gift of the Holy Spirit can't be bought. Like grace, it's unmerited and undeserved. It comes to us as a gift.

The apostle Peter told Simon to repent. My friend Craig Barnes, who is the president of Princeton Seminary, has written a book entitled *When God Interrupts*. In this book he writes that central to the Bible's teaching on conversion is the call to make a choice, and the theological term for this is repentance.

The Greek word for "repentance" is the word *metanoia*. It simply means "to turn." Before it became a biblical term, *metanoia* was commonly used to describe the process of turning around. If a man left his house and then remembered he had forgotten something, like his wallet, he would "repent." He would turn around and go back home. The biblical call to repentance essentially means to turn around from the wrong direction in which we're going, and turn toward the work God is doing in our lives.

Craig says that "our eternal salvation may be secured by the initial decision to accept Christ's forgiveness, but conversion is a lifelong process of turning away from our plans and turning toward God's maddening, disruptive creativity."²

Simon the Sorcerer may have been the first person who attempted to try and turn the spiritual into a commercial enterprise, but he certainly was not the last. The things of God can't be bought, and the gospel of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit should never be sold. The grace of God is free for the asking.

Conclusion/Application.

Can you look at the events of your life and believe that God works all things together for good? Have the events in recent months been a shattering experience, or have they simply been a scattering one for you? Can you trust that God has a good plan, and that He will use even the painful things that have happened for your good?

I began my message today with the story of the man and his horse in China. I want to close this morning with a true story about a man in Colorado. In Longmont, Colorado, near Boulder where I used to live, there's a plaque on a street in that city which marks a spot where a butcher shop once opened, and then the owner went bankrupt. Now, why in the world would there be a plaque on a street in the city of Longmont for a butcher shop that failed? Well, the plaque goes on to say, "The owner of this shop moved to Wyoming and opened a dry goods store, and he enjoyed a measure of success."

The man's name was James Cash Penny, and, as Paul Harvey would say, now you know the rest of the story. J.C. Penny was a follower of Jesus Christ, and he didn't let the disappointment of his failure in Longmont keep him from serving the Lord to the best of his ability. He trusted God that if things didn't work out in his first enterprise in Colorado, God had something better in store for him down the road. And He did.

We don't know how the story of Simon the Sorcerer ended. Perhaps he did repent and became more genuine in his faith. The point is all of us are in the middle of our stories, and God isn't finished writing them yet. He has a plan for you, so be patient with the Lord and let the story of your life unfold. The older I get the more surprised I am at the providence of God and how He can take the difficult things of my life and use them for good.

Have the recent events of your life been shattering, or have they simply been scattering, putting you in just the right place where Christ wants to use you? Trust in the Lord, and look for the ways in which He will use even the disappointments and set-backs of your life for His glory. God isn't finished writing your story yet, and there is more in the next chapter to come. This was true for the early church, it was true for Simon the Sorcerer, it was true for J.C. Penny, and it's true for you, too, my friend. Amen.

¹I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, p.157.

²M. Craig Barnes, *When God Interrupts*, p. 28.