
The Spread of the Gospel

Sermon • Rev'd Andrew Hoggan • 13th September

Matthew 4:23-25 Acts 8:1-25



Matt 4:23-25 Acts 8:1-25 A Hoggan

Let's pray, Lord Jesus as we seek to grow your kingdom give us faith and hope, amen.

How do we remain hopeful in the face of what we see in many situations, declining church numbers?

For me I have to look beyond what I see and to the one who said "I will build my church, and the very gates of hell will not prevail against it."

That is not a defensive statement. It's an "advance and conquer" sort of statement. It's a statement that should give us perspective and confidence. The world might say we are irrelevant and our day has passed. Even some in the church might say we have to change our message so as to accommodate the norms and practices of society.

"I will build my church" says Jesus. Acts, over and over again, proves Jesus true to his words. No matter the opposition. No matter the challenge. Every time the enemy tries something it backfires.

We will see that again today as the gospel advances into new territory. Samaritan territory. Stephen paves the way, all be it though his execution and what followed. Philip will follow through and make the most of the opportunity.

So the first thing we see in our passage is that the church doesn't just struggle through the challenge, the challenge is the very thing God will use to advance the Gospel.

Persecution will prove a prod to proclamation. Vs 1 and Saul was there giving approval to Stephens death. Stephens death is just the entree. Saul will cook up a storm of fury unleashed against these Jesus believers. He will do everything he can to destroy the church.

Including going from house to house dragging off men and women and having them put in prison. We get a clue as to the vindictiveness of Saul in the original language. The specific words used point to Saul's brutality and his sadistic cruelty. Saul hated Christian's. He would later acknowledge that he acted like a wild animal.

What a wonder and a sign that the Lord Jesus would change Saul from a brutal, sadistic murderer, to the greatest pastor, teacher, and missionary in the NT.

Lest we think this was a snap of the fingers turnaround, Paul dropped off the radar a couple of times. One of them for a period of some 14 years. One of them for a 10ish year period. It would seem the Holy Spirit took as long as needed to recalibrate Saul's thinking and understanding of God's word in the OT, and preparing Paul to be a major contributor to the NT.

As it stands in ch 8, Stephens execution unleashes Saul who embarks on such mission of destruction that all but the Apostles flee Jerusalem. That's one of the reasons Saul had to go to Damascus. He was so effective in Jerusalem he ran out of people to persecute and had to round up more from further afield.

How though was the persecution a prod to proclamation? Because the believers were Scattered, but they were not Silent. Wherever they went they could not help but talk about Jesus.

And why not?

We have already seen how the Holy Spirit gave the believers boldness to speak in ch 4. It would seem then that this boldness had not run out. Even when they as it were being run out of town, fearing for their lives.

Scattered but not silent. Maybe even a bit scared, but not silent. Are we confident that the gospel is powerful and relevant? Our silence, or not, points to our answer.

Signs of the Kingdom. We have seen thus far in Acts how signs lead to proclamation. For example when Peter healed the man lame from birth in ch 4. That opened the opportunity to proclaim the Gospel, with the result that several thousand believed. Alternately, just as signs can open opportunity to preach, preaching is very often accompanied by signs and wonders. Healings, deliverance and the like. Here as the Gospel is being proclaimed in Samaria God is working and there is much joy in the city.

Philip proclaims Christ. The crowds see the effects of the proclamation. People are released from spiritual bondage as unclean spirits are sent packing. Many who were paralyzed or lame were healed.

Lest we be too enamoured with the miraculous. It's always good to remember that the most wonderful sign and wonder is conversion. The transformation from death to life. The transportation from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light.

That brings us to **Simon the sorcerer, Simon the magician.** Here was not working in the power of God but the power of the enemy. There may have been a bit of slight of hand going on as well, but whatever power this Simon had he was definitely in the enemies camp.

Both his actions and his attitude show that. One of the warnings from the early chapters of Genesis is that one of the strategies of the enemy is to get us thinking above our station. Even to the point where we think we don't need God. Or even come to the point of thinking we are some sort of god.

Simon saw himself in an exalted light. He boasted that he was "someone great". Simon thought himself special, almost god like. He was looked on as special, even something of a god. The people said this of him, vs 10 "this man is the power of God that is called Great" capital G. "The Great Power" was a term of deity.

Simon the Sorcerer, Simon the magician was working in the occult. He tapped into that power that the enemy is willing to hand over if we would but give ourselves in his service. Worship him, rather than the one true God.

Remember Jesus and the temptation of the wilderness. Satan offered Jesus real power and influence if he would but come over to his side. "All the kingdoms of the world I will give you if you bow down and worship me". Jesus does not call Satan the god of this world without reason. Satan of course it's

only a small g god. Further, the cross and the resurrection show Satan's chief weapons of sin and death are no match for the big G God.

We will come back to Simon later when he reappears in the passage.

Vs 14-16 the Samaritan's receive the Spirit. What happens here. Or truer to say, what hadn't as yet happened here, has raised a few questions around the receiving of the HS. Is it something that happens at conversation and Baptism, or later? There is different thinking on this, broadly defined as a "one" or "two stage" process.

Looking through scripture, the normative pattern is a one stage process, but with an ongoing filling. That is, a person comes to faith and are Baptised. At that point they receive the Spirit. But there will be times when a greater filling happens.

It happened in ch 4 as believers who had receive the Spirit at Pentecost prayed for boldness and were filled yet again. It happens in chapter 7 as Stephen, described as full of the Holy Spirit in chapter 6, in ch 7 is full of the Spirit as he sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

Either the fulness was a one of thing that keeps getting revered back to. Or Spirit filled people will from time to time, as they face great challenges, or make great stands of faith, have a fresh filling.

If that is the norm why have the Samaritan believers not received the Holy Spirit? Here is the situation. The Samaritan believers had accepted and received Jesus. But would the Jewish believers accept and receive the Samaritan believers.

A little background. There was a 1000 year breach in relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans.

- They had broken rank with the people of God 1000 years ago.
- 700 years ago Samaria had been captured by the Syrians with thousands of locals being deported to be replaced by foreigners.
- 400 years ago, the Samaritans set up of rival temple to the one in Jerusalem.
- To add insult to injury they rejected the old Testament except for the first five books, the books of Moses.

The issue was not did God accept the Samaritans as they came to accept the Messiah. It was, would Jewish believers in the Messiah except Samaritan believers in the Messiah.

If not, the spread of the gospel from the very start would be marked by division and separation. There would be a Jewish Church and a Samaritan church. And I dare say then a Gentile church.

It would seem the withholding of the Spirit happened so that when the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit, it would have apostolic authentication. It would also have the effect of helping the Samaritan Christians understand they could not reject the Jerusalem church. And they too would need to be under Apostolic instruction and oversight.

Human history and the fact we have some 45,000 Christian denominations shows we are not very good of learning the lesson of Acts 8.

To reinforce the point. In Ch 19 vs 1-3 of Acts, Paul finds some disciples in Ephesus and asks “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They answer? “No. We have not even heard there is a Holy Spirit.” Paul then lays hands on them and they to receive the Holy Spirit. This again was an anomaly which gave opportunity for apostolic verification as the Gospel continues to spread and influence.

Then in Acts ch 10 with the conversion of Cornelius and his household Peter was preaching and the Holy Spirit fell on everybody and they manifest the languages like on the day of Pentecost. But they hadn’t even been baptised yet . Then Peter declared, “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

My point in raising these examples. Sometimes God will break with the norm to build unity. Or indeed do something different from the norm to advance the gospel into new territory. That’s what’s happening in chapter 10 as Peter took the gospel to the gentles.

Vs 1, on that day great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem and all except the apostles were scattered throughout. Judea and Samaria.....

We get more details about what happened in Samaria because it gives great evidence of the reconciling and unifying work of the gospel. And God even breaking with the normal pattern of things to reinforce the need for unity.

Let’s leave this section with the thought and truth that it is better to focus on what unites us as believers as compared what divides us.

Simon's spurious salvation vs 18-24 One of the questions I had as I compared Simeon with Anannius and Sapphire was, how come Simon seems to get off lightly?

A & S lied to the HS and held back money. Simon thought you could buy the power of the HS and offered money.

Peter pronounces judgement on A and S and they dropped it on the spot. Simon certainly gets a good telling off, but he seems to get away with it. Or does he?

If Simon's conversion was spurious, if he was simply impressed with the power of the God, but not understanding the nature, or person of God, then the stakes were far higher for Simon the sorcerer, than for A & S. In one case a few years life would be lost. In the other eternal judgement.

Peter describes Simon as being in the "gall of bitterness" and the "bond of equity." I'm not completely sure what the "gall of bitterness means", but it certainly does not sound good. Overall it sounds very much like Simon was still in bondage to the enemy and had not truly broken away from his former way of thinking.

Maybe he simply wanted to add what he saw to be a greater power to his power. To be even greater in his own and others eyes. Yes Simon believed, and was baptised, and hung around with Philip. But even Satan believes. I dare say there are ones who sit in church who believe in God, who go through the motions, but do not understand the Gospel, or have saving faith. Further, did you notice he was not willing to pray for himself and asked Peter to pray for him.

Now while we can certainly pray for folk, and are encouraged to do so. We can not do for others those things that they have to do for themselves. That is repent and turn to Christ. Owning their own faith if you like.

Simons plea to Peter shows his motivation was not a recognition of the evil he had done. It was simply a way of avoiding something bad happening to him. That's not repentance. It's fear and remorse wrapped up in self interest. The text does not say what happened to Simon.

It looks, on the face of it though that his self interest was exposed and he was shown not to be a true believer, or have saving faith. Maybe Simon came to know and accept the gospel at some stage. As I'm fond of saying where there is breath there is hope. We certainly see that truth at work in the life of Saul. Ch 8 he is killing Christian's. Ch 9 he is soundly converted.

Maybe Simon one day allowed the HS to free him from "the gall of bitterness," "the bond of iniquity," "the chains of wickedness," and gave him a right heart. The Gospel is after all, the story of God turning things around. As indeed we see in this passage.

It begins with persecution. It ends Vs 25 with the apostles proclaim the gospel in Samaria and then returning to Jerusalem preaching through the various Samaritan villages on their way home.

God has got things under control. As the persecuted believers scatter the Gospel having left Jerusalem. The apostles scatter the gospel as they return to Jerusalem.

"I will build my church" Jesus said, "and the very gates of hell will not prevail, or stand up against it." Its always a good time to be a follower of Jesus and work for the furtherance of the kingdom.

That is especially so when society at large says the opposite. The greater the challenge the more God is glorified when he overcomes it.

And everybody said, amen.