

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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WHEN THE HOLY SPIRIT CAME TO SAMARIA

Acts 8:14-17

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE READING

Today we return to Acts 8 for a closer look at a brief but important passage of Scripture we read a few weeks ago. What is described in these verses was life-changing in its importance in the lives of these Samaritans who had come to faith in Christ. And, because of its doctrinal or theological significance, it is important for us to understand it rightly.

Let me set the stage for you. Three weeks ago, in our ongoing study of the life and times of Simon Peter, we looked at the “showdown in Samaria” described here in Acts 8 between Simon Peter and Simon Magus, the encounter between the apostle and the magician who wanted the power to impart the Holy Spirit for his own selfish purposes.

Leading up to their encounter, Philip, one of the original deacons, fled Jerusalem in the persecution which began with the stoning death of Stephen. Philip took the gospel to Samaria, the region to the north of Judea. Samaria was sandwiched in between Judea to its south and Galilee to its north. The result of Philip’s preaching in Samaria was that many of the Samaritans believed in Christ. Many Samaritans came to know the Savior. Many lives were changed through the power of the gospel. And, as Luke says in verse 8, “there was great joy in that city.” When the gospel takes root in a person’s life, or in a family or a community or even a nation, the result will be great joy. Just as it was in Samaria.

Word of Philip’s ministry and of the response of the Samaritans to the gospel reached the leaders of the church back in Jerusalem. Prompted by the Holy Spirit, they decided to send Peter and John to Samaria to investigate, to evaluate and authenticate the reports they had received about the Samaritans’ reception of the gospel.

That is where we begin in our reading of God’s Word today. Beginning at verse 14 of Acts 8, let’s give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s inspired, infallible, unerring, authoritative, and holy Word.

I want to talk with you today about the Holy Spirit. Specifically, I want to talk with you about the operation of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers who have put their trust in the saving power and saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ. I hope I’m talking about you, each and every one of you. I hope you are alive, spiritually alive in the Lord Jesus today. If you have not yet come to know the Savior, if you have not yet turned from yourself and your sins and by faith put your trust in Him to save you from your sins and to make you a new person from the inside out, I pray that you will do it today. It is a mistake to put it off, because you never know when it will be too late.

Let's talk about the Holy Spirit. It was a big deal when the Holy Spirit came to Samaria. Prior to that, it was a big deal when Philip took the gospel to Samaria. Why was it such a big deal? Because of the history between the Jews (like Philip and Peter and John and all the other followers of Christ in the church at Jerusalem) and the Samaritans. There had been problems between them – between the Jews and Samaritans – going way back. For hundreds of years, the relationship between them had been marked by mutual hostility, hatred, prejudice and scorn. If you know your Old Testament history, you know it went all the way back to 721 BC, when Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel. The Assyrians took many of the Israelites into exile, and then repopulated the land with Assyrians who intermarried with the Jews who remained there. To the Jews in the southern kingdom of Judah, with its capital and religious center in Jerusalem, this was a scandal of the highest order. They despised the Samaritans. (The region where they lived came to be known as Samaria.) The Jews considered the Samaritans to be half-breeds. They looked down on them as being both racially and religiously inferior. Because of this prejudice, Jews and Samaritans did not associate with one another. They would have nothing to do with each other.

Because of this legacy of hostility, the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 was surprised when Jesus spoke directly to her. And the disciples of Jesus were surprised not just to find Him talking to a woman, but especially to a Samaritan woman. It was something a self-respecting Jew just did not do. Because of the disdain Jews had for Samaritans, the fact that the hero in one of the parables of Jesus was a “good Samaritan” would have been shocking to His hearers (see Luke 10:30-37).

Jews and Samaritans just did not associate with one another. At all. But then God sent Philip to a city in Samaria with the message of the gospel, and many of the Samaritans embraced the gospel and put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. A cause for rejoicing? For sure. But it also created a dilemma of sorts for the church leaders back in Jerusalem, because they knew that the relationship between Jews and Samaritans had to be resolved in the right way, or it would result in an unholy schism (division) between Jewish believers and Samaritan believers in the church.

Several weeks ago I mentioned a Bible teacher and theologian named Dale Bruner, and his testimony that he is not only a “Christo-centrist” (Christ-centered) in his personal faith and theology, he is a “Christo-exclusivist.” That is, he believes in the exclusivity of Jesus Christ as the Savior of sinners and the way to eternal life. Apart from Jesus, there is no salvation from sin. There is no other way. I am a Christo-exclusivist, too, and I thank God that in His mercy and grace He has provided a Savior and a way to heaven for us.

In a book on the Holy Spirit, Bruner points out that Samaria was the church's first decisive step out of and beyond the boundaries of Judaism. It was both a bridge to be crossed and a base to be occupied by the church in its missionary mandate from the Lord Jesus. It was a bridge, he says, because the Samaritans represented the deepest of cliffs which separate people from one another, the racial-religious. We know that is true today. We know that, despite all the progress we have made as a nation, race still divides. Not everywhere, but in way too many places. Including the church. And we know that in way too many places in

our world, religion is used to promote hate and oppression and repression and violence. We still have bridges to cross.

For the church in the New Testament, taking the gospel to Samaria was a bridge that had to be crossed. Samaria was also, as Bruner says, a base to be occupied, because now the church was no longer just in Jerusalem among Jews alone. It had become a mission. It had taken its first step outside the cocoon of Jerusalem to fulfill the mandate of Acts 1:8, to be Christ's witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

So, what happened in Samaria was significant for both the unity of the church and its mission. That is why the apostles decided to send Peter and John to Samaria. When they got there, as Luke says, they prayed for these new Samaritan believers, they laid their hands on them, and the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit (8:15-17). The Samaritans had heard the gospel from Philip. They had believed the gospel. They had put their trust in Jesus Christ. They had received Christian baptism (8:12). But they had not yet received the Holy Spirit. Until Peter and John came and prayed for them.

The big theological question in all of this can be framed this way:

- Was the two-stage experience of the Samaritans (coming to faith in Christ followed by a subsequent, later experience of receiving the Holy Spirit) the way God usually works in the lives of believers? Or was it an exception to the way God usually works?
- Was the experience of the Samaritans the normal way God operates? Or was their experience abnormal or unique?
- Do we need to have someone with apostolic or ecclesiastical authority to lay hands on us, like Peter and John did with the Samaritans, in order to receive the Holy Spirit?
- Should we expect to have the same kind of two-stage experience the Samaritans had? How does the Holy Spirit work today?

These are big and important questions. And not everyone agrees on the answers. Not all Christians agree about it. Some Christians, particularly those who call themselves "Pentecostals" or "charismatics," believe the experience of the Samaritan believers is the normal, typical way God works. First, you come to Christ in repentance and faith, and receive the gift of salvation. Then, sometime later, you receive a "second blessing," which is often called the "baptism of (or with) the Holy Spirit." This baptism of the Spirit is separate and distinct from what takes place in salvation. And this gift or baptism of the Spirit is accompanied by the sign of speaking in other tongues or languages unknown to the speaker, just like the 120 believers who received the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. It would be like me suddenly talking about God in Russian or Chinese or Swahili or any other language I don't know.

Paul includes the gift of speaking in other tongues or languages in his discussion of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. It is a valid spiritual gift to be received with gratitude and exercised in love. Some of you have been given this spiritual gift. Though it is not part of our corporate worship or ministry as a church, I trust that you seek to exercise this gift – and every spiritual gift with which the Lord Jesus has blessed His church – for the glory

of God, the building up of His people, and the spread of the gospel. Give thanks to God for whatever spiritual gift(s) He has graciously chosen to give you, and use your gift(s) for His kingdom purposes.

But can we say, or should we say, as Pentecostal or charismatic Christians say, that every believer should seek to have a post-conversion experience of being baptized or filled with the Holy Spirit, confirmed by the sign of speaking in tongues? No. I don't believe that is what the Bible teaches. The two-stage experience of the Samaritans is not the norm. It is an exception to the norm. The way God normally works is through a single-stage experience in which we repent of our sins, believe in Christ, and receive both the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (John Stott).

Paul teaches clearly in Romans 8 that everyone who belongs to Christ (everyone who has embraced the gospel in saving faith) has received the Spirit. In Romans 8:9, he says that if the Spirit of God doesn't live in you, you don't belong to Christ. He indicates that all who have the Spirit of God are the sons (children) of God, and all who are sons (children) of God have received the Spirit of God (8:14-15). The bottom line is that if you have Christ, you have the Spirit. You cannot have Christ, says John Stott, without having the Holy Spirit.

If this is true, how do we explain the experience of the Samaritans? There is nothing in the passage to hint that they were not genuine Christian believers, nothing to suggest that there was anything lacking or defective in their response to the gospel (except, of course, for Simon Magus).

Bruner concludes (others, like Richard Longenecker, J. I. Packer, and John Stott agree) that the reason behind the experience of the Samaritans, with their coming to faith in Christ at one point in time, and their experience of receiving the Holy Spirit on a separate occasion, is that in His providence, God sovereignly chose to withhold the gift of the Holy Spirit from the Samaritans until Peter and John, as emissaries from the church in Jerusalem, came to see for themselves that God really was in it and that His grace had been given to these racial and religious outcasts. When they laid their hands on the Samaritan believers, God poured out His Spirit on them.

The giving of the Holy Spirit to the Samaritans was to demonstrate beyond a shadow of a doubt to Peter and John and all the apostles back in Jerusalem, to the new Samaritan believers, and to the whole church for all time, that Jewish believers and now Samaritan believers were on equal footing as members of Christ's church. Soon they would learn that Gentile believers were on equal footing, too. What took place in Samaria was to show that the wall of hostility between Jews and Samaritans had been broken down in Christ. They were members together of God's family.

In the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC), we believe that the baptism in or with or by the Holy Spirit takes place when an individual is born again or comes to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not a "second blessing" experienced on a separate and subsequent occasion that only some believers receive. No. The gift of the Holy Spirit is a universal blessing – universal in the sense that the Spirit is given freely and sovereignly by

God to every believer. Not just to some but to all. When you repent of your sins and turn to Christ in saving faith, you receive two priceless gifts from God: the forgiveness of your sins and the personal presence of the Holy Spirit to live in you.

There may be – pray that there will be – times and seasons in your life when you feel the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in a special way, when you are filled anew with the Holy Spirit. In fact, in Ephesians 5:18, we are given the command to “be filled with the Holy Spirit.” It is a command, yes, but it is not something we can do ourselves. The command is in the passive voice, not active. What Paul is saying in this verse is essentially this: “Let the Holy Spirit fill you” (New English Bible). If we are to be filled with the Spirit, we must yield to Him without holding back any part of our lives. We must let Him have His way in us. And we must do it again and again.

Are you willing to do that today? Are you willing to let Him have all of you?

Maybe this is a helpful way to think about it. Back in the dark ages, when I was a boy, we didn’t have “self-serve” gas stations. Every station was “full serve.” You couldn’t pump your own gas. You had to have one of the attendants at the station pump your gas. You would drive up to the pump, roll down your window (the old-fashioned way, of course – manually) and say, “Fill ‘er up.” Today, almost every station is self-serve, and just about everybody pumps their own gas.

The Holy Spirit is not dispensed like gasoline at a self-serve station. You cannot fill yourself with the Holy Spirit. You must *be filled* with the Holy Spirit. If you are a follower of Christ, if you have been saved by God’s grace alone through faith alone in the person and work of Jesus Christ alone, you have already received the gift or baptism of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is *with* you. The Holy Spirit lives *in* you.

But you will need to be re-filled with the Holy Spirit at different times, perhaps because of some sin in your life (which you must repent and renounce) or because of spiritual depletion, if you are continually giving out without taking in from God and His Word. You cannot fill yourself with the Holy Spirit. It does not work that way. But you can let the Holy Spirit fill you anew. You can go to the Lord Jesus in total surrender and trust, and ask Him to fill you again.

When the Holy Spirit came to Samaria, the believers were strengthened, the church was blessed, and God Himself was exalted. The circumstances were unusual, but God worked in those circumstances to fulfill His purposes. For His glory.

But let me ask you: Has the Holy Spirit ever come to northern Virginia? Has the Holy Spirit ever come to Kingstowne? Has the Holy Spirit ever come to Faith? Has the Holy Spirit ever come to you?

I have no doubt that the Holy Spirit is present and active in the life of this church, in this community and region. If you know Jesus as Savior and Lord of your life, then the Holy Spirit has come to you and taken up residence in your life. No doubt about it. But I long for

the Holy Spirit to have more of me and more of us. I long to see more of the presence and power of the Spirit, more of the fruit of the Spirit, more of the gifts of the Spirit, and more of the fullness of the Spirit in our church, in every church, in every part of our area, in every part of our nation, and in every nation on earth.

I long for God to send revival to His church. I long for God to stir the hearts of His people to a deeper faith and a more passionate love. I long for massive numbers of unbelievers everywhere in the world, including right here, to come to faith in Christ and be transformed by the power of the gospel. Do you long for it too?

J. I. Packer has written that those who long for revival should do three things:

1. Faithfully preach and teach God's truth.
2. Prepare the way for the Lord Jesus by removing obstacles such as any habitual sins, neglect of prayer and fellowship, worldly-mindedness, pride, jealousy, bitterness and hatred as motives for action. Repentance, he says, is regularly a harbinger of true revival and is the real start of it.
3. Pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Friends, let's do these three things, and trust God for what He will do in us, with us, and through us, in the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of His name. Lord, let it be so. Amen.