True Repentance

Series: Fully Devoted Followers

Acts 8:9-25

Sunday, January 31, 2021

Before we dig into our passage, I want us to start by thinking about some of the ways that God has wired each one of us. Science can help us to understand what we know from Scripture, that we are complex beings uniquely made in the image of God. You’ve most likely heard about a person’s IQ, and perhaps you’re familiar with EQ, but have you ever heard about a person’s CQ?[[1]](#footnote-0)

IQ stands for *intellectual quotient*. While we typically think of this as the measure of how smart someone is, really IQ measures our brain power. Think of your brain like a computer. Your IQ measures not only your brain’s harddrive capacity—how much information it can store—but also its processing speed—how quickly we can access the information. On the other hand, EQ, which stands for *emotional quotient*, is a measure of one’s ability to understand, handle, and show their emotions. If you have a high EQ, you probably work well with others and are able to deal well with stress.

There is a less well-known metric that scientists now refer to as our CQ—our *curiosity quotient*. In fact, according to one study, our CQ—how curious we tend to be—might be as important as our IQ and our EQ as we navigate the day-to-day complexity of our lives. One of the most famous high-IQ individuals, Albert Einstein, once said of himself, “I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious.”

I hope that in our walkthrough of Acts you have been exercising your curiosity quotient. If not, today is a great day to start. There are at least three things that stand out from our Scripture reading that I think are rather curious. They might not all be the most significant parts of the passage, but as we work our way through this text, I think you will agree that something curious is taking place in Acts chapter 8.

We’re only going to look briefly at the first two of these curiosities. Both are interesting and important, but they don’t need to be our main focus. However, this third curiosity is not only interesting, I think it’s the main reason why this story is in our Bibles. We’ll see that this question has the most relevance to our lives today and is worth the bulk of our time together.

Again, we’re looking together at Acts 8 beginning in verse 9 where the continuing story now focuses on a man named Simon. Luke narrates by telling us,

“Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria” (Acts 8:9a, NIV).

Simon is a common biblical name. In order to distinguish this Simon from the others in Scripture, history has given him the name Simon the Sorcerer or Simon Magus. Simon was someone who had been practicing magic in the Samaritan city in which Philip had come to preach the gospel. Aren’t you a little curious about what kind of magic this sorcerer was into?

Whatever it was, the text says that Simon had quite a reputation in town. His Samaritan neighbors were amazed by what he could do. Notice at the end of verse 9 and following that,

“[Simon] boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, “This man is rightly called the Great Power of God.” They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery” (Acts 8:9b-11, NIV).

Most of us probably have one of two pictures in mind. We might think of Simon like a modern-day illusionist, as an entertainer. I remember as a kid going to a magic show put on by the illusionist David Coperfield. You might remember him from the early 80s as the guy who made the Statue of Liberty disappear live on television. Otherwise, we might imagine that Simon was a distant cousin of Merlin, Gandalf, or the wizard Dumbledore. But neither of these ideas are quite right.

In the first-century world, most people believed that daily life in the natural world was intimately tied to the powers of the supernatural world. Many cultures believed that magic or sorcery was a way that a person could manipulate spiritual forces to bring about certain desired results.[[2]](#footnote-1) For example, the Magi or Wise Men that we read about at Christmastime were likely astrologers who studied the path of the stars in order to discern events that would take place on earth. Otherwise, a person might consult someone like Simon to gain protection from evil spirits or to place a curse on an enemy. One might also seek out the services of a magician in order to gain favor with someone or even catch the eye of an attractive member of the opposite sex.

If you’re still curious about this topic, I would be happy to point you to some good resources that will help to answer any additional questions. But for our purposes, let’s simply notice that the people of Samaria held Simon and his supernatural abilities in high regard. But that’s just the beginning of this story.

Last Sunday, Pastor Jerry reintroduced us to Philip, a follower of Jesus who had come to preach the gospel to the Samaritans. You’ll remember that Philip’s arrival in Samaria was partly due to divine opportunity and partly the result of increased persecution against Christians in Jerusalem. Here we learn more about the effect that the gospel had on this region:

“But when [the Samaritans] believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw” (Acts 8:12-13, NIV).

The significance of what was taking place among the Samaritans can’t be understated. The gospel had come to Samria and lives were being radically transformed. That’s what Jesus does when newborn believers begin to take their first steps of faith. This community—the whole community—heard what Philip had to say about Jesus and his kingdom, and they placed their trust in Christ. They turned away from their empty superstitions and their sinful rebellion against God. Instead, they turned in faith to Christ and trusted in his great name.

And they were baptized. There are a lot of baptisms that take place in the book of Acts. Individuals are baptized, whole households are baptized, and in this case whole communities were publicly identifying themselves with Jesus Christ through baptism.

Baptism might seem like a fairly safe and normal activity for church people today, but in those days, and even in other parts of our world today, baptism is a dangerous activity. Baptism in the name of Jesus meant that you were publicly professing that you had fully identified with Jesus Christ. The whole reason why Philip had come to Samria with the gospel was because enemies of the church were seeking to kill anyone who professed faith in Jesus.

Baptism didn’t save these Samaritans. It didn’t magically wash their sins away, or, by itself, bring them into new life in Christ. But it did express to a watching world of friends and enemies that they were now trusting in the saving and transforming work of Jesus Christ their Savior.

What had happened in Jerusalem at Pentecost was now starting to happen in Samaria just as Jesus had promised. And when news reached Jerusalem about how the gospel was impacting Samaria, the apostles decided to investigate. Luke tells us in verse 14 and following that,

“When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:14-17, NIV).

Now that’s curious, isn’t it? Just six chapters after the events of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit there appears to be a change in what happens when new believers begin to follow Jesus.

Faith? Check.

Baptism? Check.

Receiving of the Holy Spirit? Silence.

Here’s a second curious thing that we find in this passage. Why was there a delay between when these Samaritans trusted Christ and were baptized and when they received the Holy Spirit? Did the Spirit have trouble at the border? Was there some kind of divine shipping delay? And what does this mean for Christians today? Should those who trust in Jesus today expect to have an experience like that of these Samaritans in Acts 8, or like that of the Jerusalem crowd at Pentecost in Acts 2, or for that matter, like that of the Gentile believers that we will read about when we get to Acts 10? Curious, isn’t it?

And yet, as curious as this question is, by no means is it the main point of this passage. Once again, these things are both interesting and important, and yet we can only touch on them briefly this morning. The reason why the Holy Spirit shows up *late* in Samaria has nothing to do with God’s punctuality, but has everything to do with Jesus’s promise made back in the opening verses of Acts:

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8, NIV).

Peter and John, two of Jesus’s designated witnesses, had come to affirm to Jews and Samaritans alike that the gospel had indeed come to Samaria as Jesus promised. They confirmed that the Holy Spirit had come to bring new life to those who believe.[[3]](#footnote-2) They were bearing witness to what the Lord Jesus had said to the apostles about the coming of the Holy Spirit prior to his ascension into heaven:

“On one occasion, while [Jesus] was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit”” (Acts 1:4-5, NIV)

These accounts of the Spirit’s coming in the earliest days of the church are truly curious. More than curious, it’s amazing to imagine what it would have been like to see and to hear these things as they happened. The promised Holy Spirit was bringing God’s people into a new era of salvation history. But these outward, visible manifestations of the Spirit in Jerusalem, Samaria, and the Gentile world in Acts were intended to be unique events, and I believe, not something we should necessarily expect to see today when an individual comes to faith.

And yet, it is important for us to understand from Scripture that if we are in Christ, we too have been baptized in the Spirit. When we repent of our sin and place our faith in Christ, we are united in Christ by the Holy Spirit. We are baptized in the Spirit. We read in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13,

“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (NIV).

That’s why so often in the New Testament, especially in Acts, that new believers were rather quickly baptized with water in response to their new faith in Christ. Water baptism is an outward, visible expression of what has taken place in the heart of the new believer through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit’s arrival in Samaria was extraordinarily amazing. But I also hope that we are no less amazed by the *ordinariness* of the baptism in the Spirit that takes place at the moment of a new believer’s conversion when they truly repent and trust in Jesus Christ. Here’s how the Apostle Paul describes the extraordinarily ordinary regenerating and unifying work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a new believer:

“But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:4-7, NIV).

I’m sure that some of you have more questions about baptism in the Spirit or might hold to a different understanding of what’s going on in our passage. In the interest of time we’ll have to have those curious conversations later over a cup of coffee.

A moment ago I mentioned the word *conversion*. So let’s talk about the curious case of Simon the Sorcerer’s conversion. Follow along with me as we discover what happened next after the Spirit’s arrival in Samaria.

“When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money and said, “Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” Peter answered: “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” (Acts 8:18-21, NIV).

What’s going on here? In the midst of a great spiritual revival, Simon is focused not on the transformed hearts of his neighbors, but on the powerful hands of the apostles. Remember, Simon was a sorcerer, someone who made his living by offering supernatural services to those in need of spiritual assistance. Imagine what his Samaritan clients might say about the one they called “the Great Power of God” (v. 10) if he too could dispense the power of the Holy Spirit at will. That kind of power was priceless. And so, Simon offered Peter and John a few bucks for a share of their hands-on apostolic authority.

This, folks, is the most curious question of the entire passage: Was this Samaritan Sorcerer truly converted? Was Simon genuinely saved along with his Samaritan brothers in sisters that day? Can we expect to meet Simon in heaven, or was his faith a hoax? Some might wonder if that’s even a fair question. Who are we to judge the genuineness of another’s conversion experience? What gives us the right to question the sincerity of someone else’s faith?

But this is exactly what the Apostle Peter does. Notice Peter’s counteroffer in verse 20 and following. First, Peter issues a very strong rebuke. The Message version paraphrases Peter’s response this way:

“Peter said, “To hell with your money! And you along with it. Why, that’s unthinkable—trying to buy God’s gift! You’ll never be part of what God is doing by striking bargains and offering bribes” (Acts 8:20-21, MSG).

Peter is by no means sentencing Simon to hell. But he is warning Simon, telling him that his unrighteous heart is taking him down a hell-bound path that will eventually lead to God’s righteous judgment if he maintains this course. Simon’s only hope was to turn away from sin and begin to follow Jesus in the other direction. And so Peter called Simon to turn things around:

“Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin” (Acts 8:22-23, NIV).

Simon may have been impressed with the name of Jesus and amazed by the power of the Holy Spirit, but Peter could see that Simon had not yet turned away from his sin and sought forgiveness by trusting in Christ as savior.

Faith and repentance are two sides of the same conversion coin. Faith is more than believing something is true, it’s an act of trust. The gospel calls us to faith in Jesus. It’s an invitation to trust in God’s promise that he has made a way of salvation for us through the work of his Son at the cross. Faith is taking God at his word, trusting that we can be redeemed, reconciled, and restored because of what Christ did on our behalf.

But in order for us to place our trust in Christ, we need to abandon our trust in whatever it is that holds our heart’s allegiance. The word *repent* literally means to change one’s mind. In fact, repentance really is about a change of worship. Who or what does my heart assign worth to? Repentance is not a new effort to modify and moderate bad behavior. I can adjust my behavior, but that doesn’t mean I trust Jesus.

When the gospel calls me to repent and believe, it calls me to confess that my trust in and worship of anything and everything that is not God has failed me. It’s a call to cut off my faith in empty things, and to place my faith in the trustworthiness of God’s promises. For Simon, Christ was not only calling him to leave behind his life of sorcery, but even more, to abandon his trust in power and reputation, and to run empty-handed to Christ in faith.

So what happened to Simon? Did he repent and follow Jesus or did he go back to a life of sin and sorcery? Honestly, we don’t know. This is the last we hear of Simon in the book of Acts. Luke doesn’t tell us how the story ends. And I think he does this on purpose. I don’t think Luke included this account so that we could speculate about Simon’s place in eternity. I think Simon’s story is meant to act like a mirror so that each one of us might consider whether or not true repentance has taken place in our own hearts.

While I hope that you have found this account of Simon’s so-called conversion interesting, I hope that this text will cause you to become passionately curious about your own conversion. My desire is not to create doubts in your mind about the genuineness of your faith, but rather to help you discern who or what truly has a hold of your trust. Even if you are someone who has walked with Christ for some time, perhaps there is an area of your life that needs a bit of realignment. Perhaps there is a need this morning for true repentance. If so, would you pray with me?

Lord Jesus, I confess that I have offered my trust that belongs only to you to things and to others who are far less worthy.

Father, forgive me for giving my worship to worthless things, for you alone are worthy.

Holy Spirit, continue the good work of transformation in me that you began when I first heard the gospel, repented of my sins, and first believed in Christ my savior.

Thank you that you have securely brought me into the body of Christ, and that in Christ no one can snatch me out of my Father’s hand.

I ask this in Jesus’s name.

Amen.

1. Thomas Chamorro-Premuzic, “Curiosity Is as Important as Intelligence,” *Harvard Business Review*, August 27, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. C.E. Arnold, “Magic,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, InterVarsity Press (1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Gary Waters, “One Baptism or Two? What Are We to Make of the Spirit Baptism in Acts 8?” www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/spirit-baptism-acts-8/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)