

13. In or Out of Step with God's Spirit

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[0 : 00] 8, which is all about being in or out of step with God's Spirit. So often when the Church is faced with a crisis, a crisis of opportunity or a crisis of opposition, and of course very often both of these things are inseparable, it's then that we discover in our corporate life, as well as in our individual Christian lives, whether we really are in step with the Spirit of God, or in fact, whether we're badly out of step with him, out of step with his gospel priorities, with his mission plan, and with his saving power.

And there are times in our lives, especially in our corporate church life, that just such crisis moments arise, and they expose an awful lot of truth about just how closely we really do identify with the mission of Jesus.

And we, you and I, us as a congregation here, are we really and truly focused on the calling of God, on his purpose, so that if a great crisis of persecution, for example, were to erupt among us in our lives?

Would we be revealed to the world as a truly powerful missionary force? Or would we, in fact, be revealed as a bit of a sham, full of all sorts of flannel about evangelical Christianity and spiritual zeal, but in actual fact, just self-serving and self-preserving of our own reputation, our own sense of importance?

Well, a crisis, literally, is a time of judging, isn't it? It's what the word means. It's just like that in the world at the moment, isn't it?

[1 : 47] In the world of business and dodgy investment and so on. And famous investor Warren Buffett so famously said, it's when the tide goes out that people see who's been swimming naked.

And there are a lot of very sheepish bankers in the world today, aren't there? And governments. Actually, if you think that's rather a crude statement, read Revelation 16, verse 15.

You'll find it on the lips of the Lord Jesus Christ. But just so in the life of the church. Times of crisis are critical junctures in our church life and in our own Christian lives.

Times when there are challenge and opposition, as well as times of great blessing and opportunity. And these tend to be the times that reveal whether we as churches and as Christians, whether we really are in step or out of step with the Spirit of God.

As we've seen, almost every chapter in Acts is a crisis of one kind or another. In Acts 8, as we read, is certainly a critical juncture in the life of the church.

[2 : 51] We saw it last time in Stephen's death, the first Christian martyr. And that was the catalyst for the next great movement of God's plan. His unhinderable, unstoppable plan for his kingdom.

And it was at a time of great crisis, of great moment, as the church scattered from Jerusalem, that with it, the gospel was scattered like a fertile seed and brought life in every direction.

Just as of course Jesus said it would. So let's look then at chapter 8, verses 1 to 25. It falls, I think, into three convenient sections for us. Verse 1 to 8 describes Saul's great scattering.

Verses 9 to 17, Samaria's great salvation. And then verses 18 to 25, Simon's great sin. First then, think about Saul's great scattering of the church.

And it was indeed a painful scattering, but one that truly advanced the gospel. Verse 1, there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.

[4 : 06] The main point that Luke wants us to grasp here is that when Christ's people are in step with his spirit, they display true gospel priorities. And so together they overcome even the fiercest opposition, and the result is a tangible advance for the gospel.

And that's because their focus is on the proclamation of Christ, not on the preservation of themselves. Now the first thing to notice in these verses is that it really was a painful scattering.

There was nothing trite, nothing inhuman, indeed nothing superhuman about their reaction to Stephen's martyrdom and the awful pogrom that was leveled against them.

It must have been devastating, terribly distressing, to be sent fleeing from the ravaging of Saul, as verse 3 calls it. It was a great persecution.

And there was much fear, no doubt, and many tears. Verse 2, devout men buried Stephen and made a great lamentation for him. There was no happy, clappy funeral for Stephen.

[5 : 14] There was deep grief. And rightly so, because a great man of God was dead. And now likewise many others were being brutalized and imprisoned, and very probably also murdered in the same way.

And so the Christians were forced to flee from Jerusalem. A truly painful scattering it was. Grim and powerful opposition to the church of Jesus Christ, stirred up, no doubt, by the devil himself.

But, and we've seen this many times, the gates of hell themselves cannot prevail against the plan and purpose of God. Jesus said, I will build my church.

And so God is in control, even of this most terrible experience for his people. And he's at work in it and through it for good, and for great blessing and glory.

Just as he was at work for great good in the time of Joseph, remember, when Joseph was sold wickedly by his brothers into slavery in Egypt. And in the end of the book of Genesis, in chapter 50, verse 20, Joseph is able to say to his brothers, you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good, for the saving of many lives.

[6 : 27] And God is always in control, in and above even the very worst of our human circumstances. And when as believers we see that and we understand that, then even in great adversity, great things will happen for God through them.

And that's what happened here. Verse 4 should begin with the word, therefore, it's there in the original Greek. Don't know why it's missed out in the ESV. Probably, I guess, because it seems so odd, doesn't it? But that's the very point.

The believers were scattered in a great persecution, verse 1. And Saul is ravaging the church, verse 3. Therefore, verse 4, those who were scattered went about preaching, or better, sharing the good news about Jesus Christ.

You see his point. They're totally in step with the Spirit of God. They understand the priorities of the Gospel. And so their focus, no matter what the circumstances, is on proclaiming Christ Jesus, not on preserving themselves and their comfort and their safety.

And the result is that there's a truly tangible advance in the Gospel. Philip goes into Samaria, verse 5, totally new territory. And there was an extraordinary response, we're told, to the preaching there.

[7 : 49] The power of God was let loose, verse 8. So there was much joy in that city. Now isn't there a wonderful encouragement in this, as well as perhaps something to sober us?

It is sobering, isn't it, to think that it almost required God to allow persecution to break out to get the church into action. Remember, Jesus' promise had been that the Gospel would fill not just Jerusalem, but Judea and Samaria, and from there to the ends of the earth.

And it does often seem throughout the New Testament that it's in spite, sometimes, of the church's inertia that God's kingdom has extended. Now it's certainly been true, hasn't it, through the history of the Christian church in 2,000 years.

Think of the huge inertia, for example, that William Carey met, that he had to overcome when he was trying to suggest to people, to the church in his day, that God actually wanted Christians to use means for the conversion of the heathen.

Oh, if God wants to convert people in far countries, they said, he'll do it himself without our help. Huge inertia that he had to overcome to say, no, God wants us to go and convert them for him.

[9 : 03] And it does rather seem as though the Jerusalem church dragged its feet a bit in the whole context of worldwide mission. Certainly later on, it was Antioch, not Jerusalem, that became the real center of missionary operations, the hub from which Paul and his missionary journeys were supported and driven.

And actually, that ought to give us pause for thought, wouldn't it? Because where God's people do get out of step with his missionary purpose, where his church slumbers, it may well be that he does have to bypass them or kick them into action through persecution.

Perhaps find others who will see the real urgency of gospel mission in the world. Maybe that's what God's saying to the West today and our Western churches. I mean, for a couple of hundreds of

years, it's been the English-speaking world, hasn't it?

That's been the engine from mission to the world. But increasingly, the church in the West is becoming a spent force. And the impetus is moving elsewhere, to the South and to the East. Well, praise God if that's what he's doing. And missionaries are flooding out of places like Korea and China and South America. But it's sobering for us, isn't it? And even here, perhaps God allows such persecution to wake up the church in Jerusalem.

[10 : 21] And yet it is a huge encouragement as well, isn't it? Because God is in control. He's not defeated. As Paul says to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2 and 9, you can persecute the messengers, but God's word is not chained.

And these believers were, it seems, as they were scattered, but very much in step with the Spirit of God. Everywhere they saw it as an opportunity to evangelize.

They were in line with God's gospel priorities. They understood, therefore, that whatever happened to them was happening for the advance of the gospel. And the gospel did advance.

It's rather wonderful, I think, that this section that begins in verse 2 with great lamentation ends in verse 8 with great joy. And that's the pattern of genuine gospel ministry.

and mission, isn't it? Death works in us, says Paul, that life may be at work in you. A painful martyrdom.

[11 : 21] A painful, distressing scattering. But, that's how the gospel seed works to a great harvest. That's what Luke's telling us. The seed that Jesus said falls into the ground and dies, brings forth much fruit.

That's a great comfort to us, or it ought to be. Because if you know anything yourself about sharing Christ and his gospel in your own life, in your own workplace, in your family, you know it involves pain.

You know often it involves tears. But that's the way to a harvest of great joy. Isn't that true? Great lamentation often is what gives way to great joy.

Remember God's promise in Psalm 126. Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy. He who goes out weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bearing his sheaves with him.

Is that how you feel sometimes? In your workplace, with your family, with your friends, maybe at school, at university. You feel as if you're up against it all the time.

[12 : 33] Maybe you are feeling that you're being ravaged by others, by opposition. Maybe you're just acutely conscious of how hard it is and how painful it is. Maybe even this week you've shed tears for those that you long to believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Well, remember that in God's economy, so often it's great lamentations lamentations that is the womb of great joy. The tears of the saints are all recorded in God's book.

That's what the psalmist tells us. Every tear shed for Jesus Christ will rebound in blessing for the sake of his name. That's God's message.

That's what we see here. It was a painful scattering. But one that advanced the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. That's his pattern. It should be an encouragement to us.

It should also be a warning to all of those who would seek to stamp out the church of Jesus Christ and the gospel. You'll never ever succeed if you think that. And moreover, the more you try to do it, the more it will rebound against you.

[13 : 43] The more ravaging of the church, the more will be the rejoicing as the seed bears fruit. So, verse 8, there was much joy in that city and all through Samaria.

That brings us to the second thing I want us to note and that is Samaria's great salvation. Verses 9 to 17 speak of a powerful salvation that truly unites the church.

The thing that Luke wants us to see here in these verses is that when Christ's people are truly in step with his spirit, they understand his true gospel plan. And that means that together they are able to overcome even the most fierce prejudice and division.

And the result will be real and tangible unity in his church. And that's because when God's people are like that, their focus is on the lordship of the one Christ.

It's not on loyalties to our own different cultures. Now, Samaria was a very mixed up place. It was full of spirituality but it was equally full of confusion.

[14 : 53] I guess that makes it pretty much like Glasgow today. If you've any doubt about that, go across the road into Borders Bookshop and look at the spirituality section. You'll see it is a place of

great confusion. So, verse 9 tells us that the Samaritans were greatly taken or perhaps it should read greatly taken in by a man called Simon.

He had them literally spellbind. It's obvious that these people had a hunger for God. They wanted to be in touch with the divine power. So, verse 10 says that from the greatest to the least they all paid attention to him.

There's spiritual hunger in evidence aplenty here, isn't there? But there's real confusion and there's real corruption of that spirituality. Now, if you remember, Jesus himself was plain enough about that and about the Samaritans.

Remember in John chapter 4 he met a Samaritan woman at a well and he gently rebuked her because of her lack of understanding, because of her vagueness and her confusion. But there was more than that though with the Samaritans.

There was a great, great hostility between Jews and Samaritans. Like most natural hostilities it tended to go a long way back in history. In fact, it went back about a thousand years to the division of the kingdom into north and south after the time of Solomon.

[16:10] The northern kingdom, Israel, had its capital, Samaria. The southern kingdom, just the tribes of Judah and Benjamin had the capital, Jerusalem. After the invasion of Assyria in 722 BC, the northern kingdom was exiled by Assyria and the Assyrians resettled Samaria with all kinds of foreigners and mixed race folk so that the natural indigenous inhabitants joined together and interbred with the native Samaritans.

And of course, what you had was a recipe for ethnic hatred and rivalry. Well, that's what empires do, isn't it? Explains so much of our world today.

Empires screw up natural tribal borders. They redraw the maps. They create arbitrary nations like the Congo, for example. And the result is insuperable ethnic conflict for hundreds of years.

That's just our world today. Well, that was Jews and Samaritans then. And so Jews, especially Judean Jews from Jerusalem and around, they hated Samaritans.

As John Stott says, they regarded them as both heretics and schismatics. They built their own temple in rivalry to Jerusalem. They had their own version of the Bible, just the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, but their own particular version.

[17:30] And the Jews hated them and the Samaritans reciprocated that hatred. If you read in Luke chapter 9, verse 51 and following, you'll see that they rejected Jesus in his ministry. Why? Because he had set his face towards Jerusalem.

We're not going to have anything to do with a dirty southerner from Jerusalem, they said. We're surprised that no one of you dirty southerners even knows that there's cities or culture up here at all. Spend all your time inside that M25 chariot way.

Well, that's the sort of idea. By the way, if you remember at that time, James and John's reaction as disciples was none too tame either, was it? Lord, shall we call down thunder and fire from heaven to consume them?

That's what they said. So there was no love lost between Jews and Samaritans, not even the disciples of Jesus and Samaritans. And yet there was a real spiritual hunger there in that place. And remember in Luke's first volume, in Luke's Gospel, it's Luke who records Jesus' parable about the good Samaritan. And you remember John chapter 4, how Jesus deliberately went into Samaria in order to meet that woman at the well.

[18:42] And you remember that he said in that place the fields were white unto the harvest. The disciples were amazed then but Jesus said the people are ready for the Gospel of Christ.

But sometimes that is the way, isn't it? Sometimes you find that there are people who are very hostile and very angry and outwardly opposed to the Gospel. but it's because deep down there's actually a great spiritual hunger.

There's a great thirst for truth and for meaning, for true satisfaction. I suppose it's no surprise that very often in those people there's such fruitful ground for bogus charlatans like Simon.

Just think of how the cults from all over the Western world descended upon Eastern Europe after the coming down of the Berlin Wall. Same today in China. And yet God drives the Gospel out of Jerusalem even using terrible persecution to do it because like Jesus in John chapter 4 the Gospel must needs go through Samaria.

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria and in all the world. And so we read here of a powerful salvation demonstrated there.

[20 : 04] Verses 6 and 7 speak about the signs of the kingdom of God just like when Jesus himself was present, isn't it? Just like when the apostolic ministry was at its height in Jerusalem as we read in Acts chapter 5.

But notice that above all it was the satisfaction of the message of Jesus that touched these people. That's what verse 6 says. They used to pay attention to Simon and his magic. But now verse 6 the crowds with one accord paid attention what? To what was being said by Philip. Or what was being said by Philip.

Verse 12 tells us the good news, the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus was being proclaimed. And that's what changed their life allegiance.

They publicly associated themselves with the new community, with the Church of Jesus Christ by being baptized. a whole new allegiance. No longer paying any attention to the mumbo-jumbo and the magic, however impressive it was.

[21 : 04] And we needn't doubt that Simon had real power, dark power, no doubt. But instead they're taken up with and they're captivated by the name of Jesus and the Gospel of the Kingdom. And even Simon says verse 13 it seems, professed faith and joined in.

We'll come back to him in a minute. But this really is a great salvation in some areas, isn't it? It's a full salvation. Just like the salvation that came to the Jews in Jerusalem.

And that's what explains verses 14 to 17. Didn't you think when we read it that verse 16 was very, very odd? Howard Marshall says it's the most extraordinary statement in Acts.

Why? Well, because nowhere else in the book of Acts anywhere do we read of the Holy Spirit being held back from believers in this strange way. These Samaritans had only been baptized.

They hadn't received the Holy Spirit. But how on earth can that be? Remember back to Acts chapter 2. What did Peter say? If you repent and believe in Jesus as signified by baptism, then in receiving forgiveness of sins you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

[22 : 20] But of course, you can only repent, can't you? Receive forgiveness of sins if the Holy Spirit gives you that new birth and enables you to repent.

Later on, we'll see when we come to Acts chapter 10 that the Holy Spirit fell on Cornelius and all of his household while the word, the gospel, was still being preached to him before even he was baptized without anybody laying hands on him or doing anything.

So why on earth is this episode in Samaria so peculiar? Why are there two clear stages here? Well, let me first tell you clearly what the wrong explanation is.

It's clearly, utterly wrong to take a unique, abnormal episode like this and say that this must therefore be the normal way, the normal pattern by which we'd expect things to happen.

That would be bizarre, wouldn't it? That, of course, is the classical Pentecostal position. You see, there's a two-stage process. First, you believe and are baptized with water and then, afterwards, subsequently, you must be baptized with the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands.

[23 : 35] The Roman Catholic position, in fact, is very, very similar. It shouldn't surprise us because Catholicism and Pentecostalism at root are exactly the same thing. Both of them add to the gospel something more than Christ alone for salvation.

And therefore, alas, they subtract from the true gospel and, in fact, destroy the gospel. So, in the Roman understanding of this, it's the same belief that they hold except that the Roman Church insists that because here it was the apostles who laid hands on these believers in Samaria, then so it is those who are the direct descendants of the apostles alone who can administer the Holy Spirit today.

Therefore, you must be a bishop in the Roman Catholic Church. Only one such as that can confirm you at your confirmation and truly admit you into the church that you truly receive the Holy Spirit.

But both of these positions, of course, are totally untenable because they ignore completely the uniqueness, not the normality, of this episode. And, in fact, they ignore the plain teaching of the whole of the rest of the New Testament as well.

If you take the kind of approach that comes up with that idea, you can make the Bible say anything you want it to say. But we can't do that. The whole point that Luke is making here by recording this highly unusual, indeed this unique sequence of events in Samaria, his whole point is to tell us that he is making a great big point.

[25 : 08] And his point is that these believers in Samaria received a full salvation experience. He's demonstrating to us the truth of God's great gospel plan to unite all as one in Jesus Christ.

These people aren't yet fully Gentiles. They're sort of half and half between Jews and Gentiles. But it's stage two of Jesus' great commission coming to pass. Israel is being restored.

It's being united as one people, as the prophets foretold. And soon, as we sang in that paraphrase of Micah chapter 4, soon the nations too would stream to the light of God in Jesus Christ.

And it happened this way in Samaria to demonstrate beyond all possible doubt on both sides that the Samaritans are partakers of exactly the same full, common salvation through the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.

The same apostles of the Jerusalem Pentecost lay their hands on these Samaritans. And everybody sees beyond all possible doubt that the same Spirit is bestowed on them all.

[26 : 22] And so there was a message for all sides, wasn't there? For the Samaritans there was a real message that they had to recognize the need to repent. To repent of their wrong theology.

to recognize that yes, salvation is from the Jews and that full salvation can only come through Jesus Christ, the Jewish Messiah. That's very important today, isn't it?

Because you can't remain a Samaritan, you can't remain wrong in your theology and become a real Christian. Just being hungry for spiritual things isn't enough.

However well-meaning you are, no, salvation is in no other name than the Jesus of history, the Christ of Scripture. Whether you're a Samaritan or a Jew or a Muslim or whatever you are, salvation is found only there.

But there was also a message clearly for the Jews as well, wasn't there? The people that you have thought of as scum and dogs, they are heirs with you in the grace of life in Jesus Christ.

[27 : 26] You can't deny it. Later on in chapter 10 we read the same. They couldn't deny that the Holy Spirit had fallen even on Gentiles. The way to salvation is through Jesus Christ and Him alone.

Not through Jesus Christ plus your particular tradition of Jewishness or whatever else it might be. It's a powerful message to everyone isn't it? That the Lordship of Christ transcends all cultural loyalties, all backgrounds, all race, all distinctions of status and everything.

That's so important for us isn't it? You see if we are Christian people in step with the Spirit, if we are attuned truly to God's great gospel plan, then that must overcome every prejudice, every division that there could be in the Christian church.

It forces us to see that we are all one in Christ Jesus with those who believe. And there will be therefore a tangible unity in the church of Jesus Christ.

That means we need to ask, don't we, of ourselves, of our own church, our own lives, how in step with the Spirit of God are we in our thinking on that? Do we allow the common Lordship of Jesus Christ to transcend our particular cultural loyalties?

[28 : 52] It can be hard, can't it, for folk who have been in the church for years and years, all their lives, to welcome Samaritans as it were, to welcome folk who have been very confused in their background, quite mistaken in their theology, very, very wrong in their beliefs, but to realize that they are fully equal sharers with you and me in the grace that's in Jesus Christ.

Snobbery in the church is a terrible slight, isn't it, on the Lord Jesus Christ? Whether it's class division or racial division, whatever it is, just as the reverse, of course, is as well, the kind of reverse snobbery that has a chip on the shoulder.

I'm just as good as you, you pompous so-and-so, just because you've been here for years. It's easy to think like that both ways, isn't it? But you see, where we're in step with the Spirit of God, we understand God's cosmic plan for eternity and we'll display that manifold wonder of God.

Intangible unity here in the church that we live in. That's our calling. Read Ephesians chapter 3. God is using the church to display to earth and heaven the wonderful wisdom and mercy of God.

So we need to ask, is that always in evidence in your life and in mine, in our home life, in our friendships, in the kind of time and attention we give to people who are not quite like me?

[30 : 21] The friendships we have, the honour we give. Big questions, aren't they? We could say a lot more about that, but we must go on to our last point here in verses 18 to 24 about Simon's great sin, a persistent sin that truly exposes the heart.

But Simon, verse 18, offered the money, saying, give me this power also. See, what verse 18 reminds us plainly is that when professing Christian people are not in step with the Spirit of God, some in the church, alas or not, despite all outward appearances and professions of genuine faith, when they're not in step with the Spirit of God, they show that they've totally misunderstood the gospel of God's power.

In fact, the truth is that they're overcome by sin and by selfishness. And the result then is a very tangible bitterness and damage in the church of Christ.

And that's because the focus of such people is in seeking power not to promote Christ but themselves. Not to be controlled directly by his Spirit but in fact to control and direct other people in the name of Jesus.

I suppose the first thing to notice here in this section is Luke's honesty. He just tells us the truth, doesn't he? This is real ministry he's talking about, real churches. There's no whitewashing, no spin doctoring.

[31 : 54] I often wonder when I read the conference brochures that tell us about some marvellous speaker who's going to be coming, so and so who's a sought after speaker and leader, who leads a thriving church planting movement, who's got a highly successful multi-medium ministry and so on.

I often think, is that the real world? Back in the real world it seems, in the real church, even apostles in the midst of a great spiritual awakening, even they can be duped it seems.

At the very least, it must have been a huge disappointment to them in their ministry, don't you think, this episode with Simon? You can imagine what people were saying about Simon. Do you see Simon the sorcerer?

Even he's become a Christian. Never stops following Philip around, isn't it? Marvellous. Simon the sorcerer. Probably reminds us we should be a little bit wary, shouldn't we, about the celebrity converts, you know, when the film star professes Christianity and everybody rushes to embrace them and then about six months later they take on some other religion.

It does mean we've got to be realistic as Christians in the church, doesn't it? We can only do as Philip did. We can only go by a person's credible profession of faith when we're admitting people into the church.

[33 : 14] We sometimes talk, don't we, in strange ways. We say, well, I sometimes wonder if so-and-so is really converted or not. It's not a phrase that the New Testament ever uses really.

The New Testament tends to say that if you claim to be Christian, then the apostles will treat you as Christian. Even if you're being very wrong and disobedient, even if you're in the act of apostatizing. Paul talks to such in his letter to the Galatians and calls them brothers. I think we're called to do the same. If people claim Christ, then they must be called to live as Christ, to take up the responsibility to be God's covenant people, and at the same time to take heed of the very severe warnings there are for those who claim to be Christian but rebel against Jesus.

But poor Simon, it's so easy for sinful flesh to be so taken up with power, isn't it? And yet for all the wrong reasons. You see, he was mesmerized by these miracles.

He wanted that power for himself. He wanted again everybody to take notice of him. They used to pay attention to him but now nobody was paying attention to poor Simon, only to Jesus and his apostles.

[34 : 25] And he wanted this power in addition to the powers that he had before which had been eclipsed by the transforming power of the gospel so that all the focus might again be on him, not on Jesus.

You see, in the end, the fruit of real transforming gospel power can't be hidden and it was evident in Samaria. But nor can the power of sham the heart that hasn't really been gripped by Jesus, that hasn't surrendered to his lordship, that hasn't done that, but has really just seen the Christian faith and the church as a way of self-serving and self-promotion.

And alas, you see, there are always both of these attitudes and both of these people in the professing Christian church today. Some people like to think that you can have a pure church, totally unalloyed by sin's worldliness.

No doubt, they think they'd be much wiser than Philip and the apostles in deciding who they would admit to the church and baptize. That's sheer folly, isn't it? You do think that way and you find a perfect church like that, don't join it, you'll spoil it, won't you?

Unless you're perfect, are you? You see, the sin of Simon is the persistent sin in the Christian church because it's a persistent tendency in all of our hearts, in yours and mine, to assert ourselves, to want to glorify ourselves, to want to be somebody, to want people to pay attention to me.

[35 : 54] That's really asking God to serve me, isn't it? Not for me to serve God. That was Adam and Eve. It's all of us too. And the church, the church gives us a wonderful opportunity to dress up that sin in pious clothes and to pretend to be good and godly.

But there's all the difference in the world, isn't there, between a Stephen and a Simon. Between believers like those in verse 4 who are truly controlled and directed by the Spirit's power and give themselves and rejoice in persecution if it makes Christ known that Jesus can be exalted. Between people like that and those like Simon, who want really to control the Spirit of God in order to promote themselves and often to control others too.

It's a sin of consumer Christianity, isn't it? Which is all about fulfilling my needs and fulfilling my potential and exercising my gifts. Where God's power in the gospel is really for me and my benefit. Whether it be money or magic or whether it be my career or marriage or family or whatever it might be. But it's not for mission. It's not for sacrifice.

[37 : 10] Painful and costly witness to Jesus. Too often in a church setting it is power to want to manipulate others and influence them.

Simon didn't just want the power, he wanted to be able to dispense it, to control it, to decide who he shared it with. That's the mark of the cult leader, isn't it? But also, alas, it's the mark of the ambitious sinful heart that so easily rises up in each one of us.

None of us really, if the truth be told, none of us really likes our ego to be pushed aside into the shade, do we? Even when it's Jesus that's coming into the limelight instead of us.

That explains why in some churches where the gospel is suddenly let loose, when for the first time, perhaps in generations, the gospel is truly proclaimed, all hell is let loose.

Because certain people who previously had the limelight, who had all the attention, are suddenly losing it to one Jesus Christ. And that attitude, you see, is totally out of step with the Spirit of God.

[38 : 22] And it's dangerous and destructive to the church. Verse 23 describes it as like a gallbladder squeezing bitter bile into the life of the church and dragging others into the bond of iniquity.

That's a phrase from the prophets, by the way, that alludes to a whole people being led into self-delusion, into thinking that they really are alive and worshipping God, but actually being far from Him, totally out of step with His Spirit.

It doesn't take a lot to affect a whole church, does it? It's like one soldier in the parade going off step. Very quickly will have everybody off step. That's why in Hebrews 12 verse 15, this very phrase is picked up.

It comes from Deuteronomy 29 and the writer says, see that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble and by it many become defiled. And yet that attitude of self-promotion rather than Christ-promotion, that's what can destroy a church.

And it will destroy us also, if that's what's in our own hearts. Verse 20, literally, Peter says, to hell with you and your silver, if that's your attitude to God and to His power.

[39 : 39] Your heart is totally wrong to the core, he says. You need to repent from such wickedness. You need to seek forgiveness urgently if it's possible. Don't be presumptuous, he's saying.

This is deadly serious. And you need to take God's word very, very seriously. Well, Luke leaves us hanging, doesn't he? Doesn't tell us what happens to Simon.

Quite deliberate. He wants us to leave us with all of that to think about as a church, at a critical juncture in our church's life, and as individuals, wherever you or I may be in our Christian walk. What about that walk? Are we walking in step? Or out of step with the Spirit of God? There's no more important question, is there, for you and me this morning?

Because God's purpose will march on. It will be unstoppable, regardless of your step or mine.

Verse 25 just underlines that point, doesn't it? It's bracketed with verse 4.

[40 : 41] Verse 4, they scattered and proclaimed the word. Verse 25, so they testified and spoke the word. They proclaimed the gospel to many Samaritan villages.

God's plan and purpose that his gospel will be spread cannot be stopped. In that sense, it makes no difference to him, really, whether you're in step or I'm in step with him or out of step with him.

For all, in the end, everything will serve his sovereign purpose. But friends, it will make all the difference in the world and in eternity to you and me if we serve that purpose as a Stephen or as a Simon.

And that's what Luke wants us to think about this morning. Let's pray. Lord our God, we thank you for your word to us, a word of encouragement and also a sobering word of challenge.

church. We pray that you may turn our minds and hearts solely to our Lord Jesus Christ, causing us to walk with him in step with his holy, righteous and pure spirit.

[42 : 00] we also may be rejoicing on the last day when Jesus comes to welcome his own. So help us together to heed this warning and to be encouraged by the grace and the power that is ours in Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.