

Acts Series Part 19

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[0 : 00] What captivates our society? Who or what is able to secure the undivided attention and fascination of our generation?

On a Saturday night, it seems to be a toss-up between Bruce Forsyth and Simon Cowell. That in itself is a revealing truth. If you don't know who I'm referring to, I salute you.

You are not missing a great deal. But to whom or to what do folks turn to distract them from the dreariness of their existence? Or to grant a measure of hope and happiness?

This evening, we want to consider the historical account of a people who were captivated by what seemed to them a genuine source of hope and happiness, of help in trouble in their lives.

And yet, a people who experienced a dramatic shift in their loyalties from being captivated to being liberated.

[1 : 08] And I'm referring to the Samaritans of whom we have read in Acts chapter 8. Now, the passage that we've read or the passage that we're concerned with is the passage that carries as a title, Simon the Sorcerer, there in Acts chapter 8.

And though indeed, the passage speaks much of this character, Simon, on this occasion, the manner in which I want to consider this passage, or certainly parts of the passage, is not to focus on Simon, but rather on the Samaritans, the people among whom he lived and carried out his business, if we can describe it in that way.

And I want to consider the Samaritans under three headings. First of all, consider them as a people captivated.

Captivated. Captivated by Simon. But then also as a people liberated. Liberated by the good news that Philip brought concerning Jesus Christ.

And then thirdly, to consider them as a people integrated. And that really is a reference to the manner in which Peter and John, as apostles, came to visit them following their conversion and what is going on there.

[2 : 32] So a people captivated, a people liberated, and a people integrated. Integrated into the church of Jesus Christ. But first, it's probably necessary and helpful just some background into who were the Samaritans.

Their history dates back to the breakup of the monarchy in Israel in the 10th century before Christ, when 10 tribes defected, making Samaria in the north their capital, and two tribes remaining loyal to Jerusalem.

Now Samaria, the northern kingdom, was then captured by Assyria in 722 B.C. And thousands of their inhabitants were deported from the country.

And the country, it would seem, was repopulated by the Assyrians, by other nationalities, by foreigners. And as far as we can tell, it would seem that from these foreigners who were populating Samaria, and some who had remained, who had not been deported, perhaps some who were able to return of the original population, from these two groups, there emerged this tribe or sect of the Samaritans, a hybrid people, both ethnically and religiously, though they themselves very much would have claimed to be worshippers of the living and true God, and would have been most offended at the suggestion of any other suggestion in that regard.

Now, following a little bit of the story, just very briefly, in the 6th century, when the Jews from the southern kingdom, who had been exiled in Babylon, returned and were rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, the Samaritans offered to help, but that help was refused.

[4 : 40] And those who have studied these matters inform us that then, roughly about the 4th century, this schism was well and truly cemented with the building of a rival temple by the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim.

And we remember the story of Jesus at the well with the Samaritan woman and how there was a theological discussion on that very matter as to where was the place where God could be worshipped.

At that time, it would seem that the Samaritans took the view that of the Old Testament Scriptures, only the first five books were considered the Word of God and were taken by them as their Scriptures.

And as we know, certainly any who have read, even fleetingly, the New Testament and the Gospels, it's very clear the animosity that existed between the Jews and the Samaritans.

That was summed up very succinctly by John in his Gospel where he states very plainly, Jews do not associate with Samaritans.

[5 : 48] Jesus, we might just comment very briefly, obviously didn't share that attitude. That was revealed in different ways and perhaps most famously in the parable of the Good Samaritan where the hero was a Samaritan, a good Samaritan.

For the Jews, even those two words together was a very offensive juxtaposition of two words, a good Samaritan. Now this very brief background will become more important for us to appreciate when we come to consider the third word, the third point that we want to consider this evening and that is this question of them being integrated.

We want to think about them captivated, liberated, and integrated. And this background, if you can just keep it in mind because it will, as I say, be of importance at that point in the sermon.

First of all though, we want to think of the Samaritans as they're described here in Acts chapter 8 as a people captivated. And our concern is with the first two verses of that section, verses 9, 10, and 11.

Three verses rather. Verses 9 to 11 of chapter 8. And we can read those verses again just to have this part of the account fresh in our minds.

[7 : 13] We read, Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great. And all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, This man is the divine power known as the great power.

They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. So as we read these verses it's very clear, it's presented for us very clearly, very explicitly that these Samaritans were captivated by this man called Simon.

Even in these few verses the language is very eloquent. They were amazed. All the people. They gave him their attention. They described him in such glorious terms.

This is the divine power. They followed him, amazed by him and for a long time this wasn't just a flash in the pan. This was someone who had captivated them for a considerable length of time.

They were captivated by Simon and by his powers. Now who is this man who had been able to captivate them in such a way?

[8 : 29] Well, he's described as one who practiced sorcery or magic. Hence, known and called and described here as a sorcerer or magician.

Now these words to our mind in our time and in our context, these words, magician, sorcerer, conjure up for us.

Maybe not the best word. It's all to conjure up. It kind of relates to the theme. But these words conjure up a picture of, well, for my generation maybe a Paul Daniels character or for the younger generation a Darren Brown.

You know, a magician, an illusionist. But the magic that Simon practiced was not mere illusion. It was not simply sleight of hand. It would probably have involved and we're not given a great deal of information in this passage, but those who have studied this matter would assure us that these magicians or sorcerers, their craft involved the healing of diseases, the bringing of a physical blessing, a good harvest to those who made use of their services, perhaps the cursing or the harming of an enemy or of somebody who had done you harm.

[9 : 57] And the flip side of that, protection against the curses of others. Some would have been involved in or certainly would have claimed to have been able to foretell the future.

This was, this is a description of some of the things that Simon no doubt practiced and did so in such a way as to amaze and to captivate the Samaritans.

He was clearly quite an expert. There no doubt would have been many who made claims to be able to do these things. But he stood out. He held in his sway, we are told, both high and low.

It wasn't just the ignorant people. It wasn't just those who had no capacity to discern or to think about these things. No, both high and low, rich and poor, the educated and the uneducated were held in his sway in Samaria.

And remember, even from what we've just mentioned concerning the Samaritans, they were no pagan tribe. They were people who claimed to worship the living and true God.

[11 : 09] They are people who certainly in a measure were versed in the Scriptures and the books of Moses particularly. And yet, they were captivated by this man named Simon, this magician, this practitioner of occult practices.

And how is it that he captivated them? How is it that he managed to have this great impact upon them? Again, there's a sense in which we can't answer that question definitively because all the information isn't presented for us.

What we are presented with is a *fait accompli*, as it were, something that was already the case. They were captivated. They were amazed. And so, the question, how did he do that, is maybe a little bit more difficult.

But I think we can at least suggest an answer to that question. Simon, it would seem, very cunningly, appealed to two basic and we might say universal needs of man.

The need for help in times of trouble. And who doesn't know what it is to need help in a time of trouble? And also, perhaps, the need for escape and a touch of fantasy in our lives.

[12 : 28] When our lives are maybe very routine and dreary and monotonous, there is this desire for something more, something exciting, some fantasy, some escape from the dreary routine.

And Simon, it would seem, was able to appeal to these two very universal needs that we find in men and women. The Samaritans, like you and me, had their share of troubles, no doubt.

They would have known what it was to endure a physical illness and the pain that accompanies it. They would have had no doubt money issues as men have today.

They would have had family conflicts, no doubt, and all the problems and the difficulties that that brings with it. And we could, no doubt, multiply the many problems that they would have had like we all have.

And here's Simon. Simon offered them not just a sympathetic ear, but a solution to their problems. An instant solution, a literally magical solution.

[13 : 38] And his pitch found an echo in their troubled lives. This was something that they wanted. This was somebody who could help calm their pain.

Here was somebody who could bring them a measure of hope, perhaps a measure of happiness in their troubled lives. He offered to help them in the troubles that they had, to heal their diseases, to solve their monetary problems.

And he also, no doubt, provided them with an opportunity to escape from the routine, a touch of fantasy and wonder.

And they liked to be entertained. And Simon satisfied that need. We're told that he amazed them. There was pleasure to be had in even observing these things that he was able to do.

This magic that he was able to practice. It was appealing to them. They found pleasure in it. They could go home and say, you won't believe what I saw today. This Simon, he's amazing.

[14 : 46] And it granted them some entertainment even in the midst of their lives. And we think of these Samaritans captivated by Simon.

And we might say, we might take the high cultural ground if there is such a thing and say, well, it all seems so primitive. And yet, as we think of the nation of Scotland that we are part of, are we so different?

Is Scotland so different from Samaria? Are the Scottish people so different from the Samaritans? Is Scotland at the beginning of this 21st century any different in any significant way?

Is it not true that we too are burdened by many and manifold problems and are searching for solutions? Is it not true that we too are still looking for a touch of fantasy in our lives?

A chance to escape from a life that fails to sparkle or satisfy? So how did he captivate them?

[16 : 00] Well, he captivated them by addressing or seemingly offering to address these very basic needs that they had. But there is another question I just want to pose concerning this man, Simon.

or rather really concerning the Samaritans under his spell. And it is this. What was their condition under his spell? So they're captivated by him.

He seems to help in some measure. He seems to distract them at least in a measure. Is that so bad? Well, as we think of the condition of the Samaritans captivated by Simon, I think we need to distinguish between what we might call their perceived condition, and by that I mean is how they would have evaluated their condition, and their actual condition.

In terms of their perceived condition, how they themselves felt, and of course it's difficult in a broad brush way to speak of all the Samaritans. They, no doubt, were a people made up of very many different kinds of people and one description wouldn't justify all without distinction.

But in the measure that we can broad brush paint them, I think we can say that their perception of their condition would have been, well, we're fine.

[17 : 28] In relation to their amazement and fascination with Simon, no doubt, if they'd been asked, if they'd been quizzed, they'd have said, well, no, Simon's a great guy. We're fascinated by him.

He does wonderful things. We're glad that he is amongst us. He's a great asset to our community. They certainly had a very high regard for him and that would, I think, reasonably suggest that he was able to satisfy their needs or so they perceived it, at least for a while or in a measure.

Difficult to believe they would have described him in such glowing terms had it not been for the fact that he responded to the needs that they had. This was their perception.

They were fine. They were enjoying life. Simon provided them with something that they were looking for. But what about their actual condition?

What was the actual condition of the Samaritans captivated by Simon, the sorcerer? Well, their actual condition was a very tragic and solemn one.

[18 : 41] The Samaritans were under the grip of the devil himself. You see, Simon was no simple illusionist as we've already commented. He was a practitioner of the occult.

He was in league with the devil. The powers that he had, and I have no reason to doubt that they were in a measure genuine. He wasn't simply a trickster.

He had a measure of genuine power. But where did that power come from? It came from the devil himself. He was the one who supplied Simon with his powers and abilities.

He was the one who enabled him to amaze this people and captivate this people. And so, as they were under the fascination and captivated by Simon, behind Simon was the devil himself pulling the strings.

You see, Simon, I think we can reasonably conclude was no different to another magician we meet in the following chapters of Acts in chapter 13 and verse 6.

[19 : 50] We can just notice there another occasion when we are presented with a magician or sorcerer. There we read of this man named Bar-Jesus, a Jewish sorcerer.

But what is of most concern or interest to me in our or considering our purposes is the brutal language that is used to describe him by Paul in verse 10 of chapter 13.

Paul looks at this man Elymas or Bar-Jesus and he looks straight at him. And what does he say? He says, you are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right.

You are a child of the devil. You sorcerer. You magician. You are a child of the devil. Would not that same, these same words, would these same words not have been appropriately addressed to Simon also?

And so the actual condition of the Samaritans under the spell of Simon, captivated by Simon was a very tragic and a solemn one.

[21 : 03] They were being carried along, oblivious to their ultimate fate, carried along, entertained to hell itself, being carried along to a lost eternity, captivated by this instrument of the devil himself who pretended to be able to satisfy their needs.

But the only ultimate end of his magic upon them was their destruction. Because the one who was pulling the strings is the one who, we are told in the scriptures, is a murderer whose only interest is to destroy.

He is a liar and he has been a liar from the beginning. He would deceive them into thinking that here was an answer to their problems. But far from being an answer, their problems would get bigger and bigger and greater and greater as they succumbed to his enticements.

This was their condition. And what of those who we are surrounded by today? What of those who live in Aberdeen today?

In 2009, what is their condition? Some might say, well, we live in a much more sophisticated age. [22 : 22] We are free from all this primitive devil talk. And yet, the devil is alive and kicking. And he continues to captivate with grand and empty promises.

He continues to appeal to man's need for help and escape. Now, perhaps, in our sophisticated society, if indeed it is so sophisticated, this is not usually in the form of sorcerers or practitioners of the occult, though there is a very real presence of such in our society today.

But the devil is not restricted to one instrument or one means of deceit. He can use many different ways to captivate and to deceive and to destroy.

How does he do so today? We today, these basic needs that we were noticing that Simon responded to a solution to our problems.

The presentation of money and financial resources as the solution is one tool used by the devil to deceive us. We live in an age where many believe that if only they have sufficient material resources, if they have sufficient money, then they have an answer to their problems.

[23 : 40] problems. If you're sad, buy a BMW and that will make you happy. Now, don't be offended if you have a BMW that's fine.

But I mention that because it caught my eye in the papers yesterday, this very glossy advert. I think it was in the Telegraph magazine. No doubt this advert has appeared in many magazines.

But it was for BMW and it said, joy is BMW. We make joy in the small print. We don't just make cars, we make joy. We make joy.

And then it goes on to say, and once you've experienced it, you're hooked for life. So if you want to be happy, if you want to know joy, buy a BMW. And people say, oh, it's just a bit of fun, they don't really mean that.

But how many people have not bought into this lie that if only they had earned a little bit more, if they had that nicer car, if they had that bigger house, if their financial situation was that little bit more secure, then all would be well and they would be happy.

[24 : 42] And this is a lie. It's the devil's lie. It's straight from the pit. It's as straight from the pit as Simon the sorcerer and his magic tricks. What about this desire to escape?

To escape to a better place and to have your life changed from that dreary, boring life that you live?

Again, money is the answer. This will reveal, very sadly, the fact that I have on occasion or do on occasion watch many of these quiz shows where there is great amounts of money to be won.

What I find very interesting is on many of these quiz shows that the quiz master, when somebody is about to win or has the possibility of winning a significant amount of money, the language used is, this is life-changing amount.

Have you noticed that? This is a life-changing amount of money and this is the idea. If you just get enough, it can change your life. Your life now is dull and dreary and boring and why is that?

Because you don't have enough money but if you win 50,000 or if you win 250,000, your life will change. Clearly, the implication, obviously, is for the better.

[25 : 56] It will be a much better life. It's life-changing money. Well, perhaps it's true. But whether it will change for the better, that is another matter altogether.

And the devil would deceive us in this way and no doubt we could multiply the examples. Time does not allow us to do so. But if we think only of this one example of the manner in which the devil would deceive us, the reality, of course, is that all that money can do and the stuff it can buy is distract us from our problems or anesthetize us against the real pain and the core causes of our problems.

But back to the Samaritans. The Samaritans were captivated. But the account also presents them as liberated. And let's quickly move on to this word that describes them.

And we find the description of this liberation in verses 12 and 13. These two verses begin with a dramatic but. But! This was their condition, captivated by Simon the sorcerer.

But! When they believed, Philip, as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

[27 : 17] There is this dramatic change in their condition. Something changes. Simon is displaced. He no longer holds them in his sway.

He's yesterday's man. He's no longer needed by the Samaritans. Liberated by whom? Is he liberated by Philip? Well, no, not by Philip.

One of the great contrasts between Simon and Philip is the manner in which Philip, unlike Simon, does not point to himself but to another.

Simon was most concerned with painting himself in these glowing terms. And no doubt the language that is used by the Samaritans to describe him quite possibly was not language they had come up with but rather this is how he had described himself.

We don't know that for sure. What is certainly true is that Simon presented himself as being the source of an answer to their problems. Philip very differently says, no, it's not me who can solve your problems.

[28 : 27] I'm not the one who can bring satisfaction to your life but I know a man who can. I know a man who can. And he pointed them to Jesus. The ministry of Philip involved preaching the good news of the kingdom and the name of Jesus as we read there in the passage.

This preaching was indeed accompanied and validated by signs and miracles and undoubtedly these signs and miracles caught the attention of the Samaritans and indeed of Simon himself. But note the content of his preaching. If you wish, the strategy with which Philip confronts this situation of a people captivated by this sorcerer.

It's interesting that Simon, sorry, Philip it would seem, doesn't waste time in rallying against the error and the evil of the one who currently was holding the Samaritans in his sway.

But rather what he does is introduce the Samaritans to one whose power is far greater. He introduces them to the king of this kingdom that he speaks of.

[29 : 41] He introduces them to one whose concern is to help them and to rescue them and that this concern to help and rescue is born of a genuine love and care for them.

He doesn't go to them and say this Simon's a liar. This Simon is of the devil. This Simon is just conning you. He says, no, let me present you with someone far greater, far more powerful and far more helpful than this Simon.

Philip knows that he will not be able to free the Samaritans from their fascination with Simon unless they are presented with one who is greater than Simon.

They will not be freed of their obsession with Simon and his allurements unless they are captivated by another whose love will surround and transform them.

Thomas Chalmers, one of the founding fathers of the Free Church of Scotland, recognized this reality in a sermon, a very famous sermon that he preached where he spoke of the expulsive power of a new affection where what he was basically saying is that people's fascination with the things of this world will not be broken by simply telling them how useless these things are.

[31 : 01] No, there needs to be a new affection and this new affection will throw out, will cast out these old tawdry affections. Chalmers himself developed the idea with these words, misplaced affections.

This was the case of the Samaritans. Misplaced loyalty to Simon. Misplaced affections need to be replaced by the far greater power of the affections of the Gospel.

And so it was with the Samaritans. Their addiction to Simon was not cured by therapy, but by Jesus taking up residence in their lives.

And so, leaving no room for nor interest in Simon and his tawdry affair. Philip came and he preached the good news.

He preached the name of Jesus. Who Jesus is and what Jesus has done for sinners. He preached the message of one who died for sinners. Of one able and willing to forgive sinners.

[32 : 05] Of one who gives rest to the weary and hope to the hopeless. And his message was like fresh water to thirsting souls. And the Samaritans received the message.

They believed the message. They were baptized into the name of Jesus. And we're told in verse 8 that it's part of a summary section that there was great joy in that city.

Not the passing superficial joy that Simon or a BMW could provide. But the real thing. Real joy. Lasting joy. They were liberated.

And this same Jesus can liberate today. And we too must learn from the wisdom of Philip. We should not waste our time focusing on the error and folly of those groping for help and escape and distraction in what cannot satisfy.

But rather present Jesus in all his wonder, in all his loveliness, in all his power. And as we do, and as that presentation is owned by the Spirit of God, we too will witness in men and women the expulsive power of a new affection.

[33 : 23] As men and women believe in Jesus and he by his Spirit takes up residence in their lives. So the Samaritans captivated and liberated but also finally and more briefly integrated.

integrated. And the reference to integrated relates to what we're told from verses 14 to 17 concerning the involvement of Peter and John in this incident.

And this third point is, I suppose, more theological in nature. We are told there in verse 17 that Peter and John having been sent by the apostles discover what has happened, that Philip has preached the gospel, that the Samaritans have listened, they've received the word, they've believed.

And then we're told that Peter and John placed their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. Now this description of the order of events, if you wish, as we find it in verses 14 to 17, creates a very real and genuine difficulty.

We might call it a theological difficulty. Howard Marshall, if we can be so bold as to say our own Howard Marshall as those who are here in this great city of Aberdeen, he's described the description of this incident as perhaps the most extraordinary statement in Acts.

[34 : 54] This reference to a people who had believed, who had been baptized, but who had not received the Holy Spirit. And it does indeed pose us with a difficulty. And we want to just very briefly note what the difficulty is and then propose an explanation to that difficulty.

And the difficulty that we have in these verses, verses 14 to 17, is that what we have here described is what we might call a two-stage Christian initiation.

When I was first noting down my thoughts, I had put, an apparent two-stage Christian initiation, but it's not an apparent two-stage Christian initiation. Here we have a two-stage Christian initiation.

We have the Samaritans, first of all, hearing the good news, believing the good news, being baptized, and then at a subsequent moment, a second point, a second stage, they, by the imposition of hands of the apostles, they receive the Holy Spirit.

And this description of events contrasts very vividly and dramatically with the words of Peter in his Pentecost sermon regarding what we might describe as the ordinary experience, the promise that is made for those who would believe.

[36 : 14] And what do we read there in Acts chapter 2 and verse 38? Peter, as he concludes his sermon, he addresses the crowd and he says, repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

There is no indication that this would be some subsequent experience, but this was part and parcel of their conversion as they believe in Jesus. So, they receive the Holy Spirit.

And yet here, the experience of the Samaritans was different. It was a different experience to the one described, or in any case, implied by the words of Peter.

And it's not simply what Peter says in his Pentecost sermon, but the overall teaching in the New Testament if we limit ourselves to one reference to Paul's teaching to the Romans in chapter 8 and verse 9.

He speaks in very clear and very explicit terms. Romans chapter 8 and verse 9. You, however, are not controlled, sorry, you, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature, but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you.

[37 : 31] And then he says, and if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. Paul doesn't contemplate the possibility of one who is a Christian who does not have the Spirit of Christ, who has not received the Holy Spirit.

This is the difficulty. Here we are presented by a group of people, the Samaritans, who it would seem, they are described in these terms, had believed the Gospel.

There is nothing, I think, to suggest that their belief was anything other than genuine and sincere. And yet, they had not received the Holy Spirit.

Only when Peter and John come by the laying on of hands, so they receive the Holy Spirit. Well, that's the difficulty.

What is the explanation? There are many possible explanations, or in any case, many explanations have been given. In a sense, we want to just focus in as quickly as possible on the one which we consider to be the most reasonable one.

[38 : 36] But if we can just comment possibilities. One suggestion which I think we can exclude without great discussion, partly because time doesn't allow us, is that the Samaritans actually were not genuine believers before Peter and John arrived.

And so, what is described is some, perhaps, intellectual recognition that what Philip was saying was true. They were amazed by the miracles.

They were drawn to this message that Philip brought, but they hadn't been genuinely converted. And it's only when Peter and John come that there is a genuine conversion. So, we don't have two stages. We have just one stage and it is when Peter and John arrive. But really, if we read and we take at face value what we have before us, it's very difficult to come to that conclusion.

Everything suggests that there was indeed a genuine, sincere faith on the part of these Samaritans. Certainly complicating the picture is, of course, Simon himself who is also described as having believed and who was also baptized and yet he certainly proves to be one who was not genuine. [39 : 52] However, our concern is not with Simon this evening. But that's one explanation that is given that I think we can discard as not being true to the information that is provided for us in this chapter.

Of course, another explanation is that the passage does indeed give ground for a two-stage Christian initiation. And this passage is used by some different Christian traditions to serve as a proof text for that conviction.

To mention just two examples, again, very briefly, the Roman Catholic Church would teach a two-stage Christian initiation. The first stage is baptism. And the second is confirmation by the laying on of hands of a bishop.

A bishop who is regarded as a successor of the apostles and through whose imposition of hands the Spirit is given. And they would say, look, this is what we have here. Yes, the believers of Samaritan were baptized, but it was necessary for the apostles to come and lay on their hands for them to receive the Holy Spirit.

Curiously, a very different Christian tradition also would look to this text in the historic Pentecostal tradition. We are also presented with a two-stage Christian initiation.

[41 : 20] It begins with conversion and regeneration, but followed at some subsequent stage by baptism in or of the Spirit, sometimes popularly known as a second blessing.

I think the most helpful thing I've heard on this matter is a very, what can we say, memorable answer given by Professor Finlayson.

On one occasion I am assured, I wasn't a witness to this personally, when I think at a youth fellowship he was asked about this matter, they said, Professor Finlayson, what do you believe concerning the second blessing or do you believe in the second blessing?

And I am assured his answer was, I believe in as many blessings as I can get. And I must say I found that a very helpful answer and I would say my amen to that, in as many blessings as I can get.

But certainly in the Pentecostal tradition there is this pointing to this text, well here we have it, they were baptized, they believed, but as yet there was this experience lacking.

[42 : 25] Now we can't delve into both of these and engage with them in any meaningful way this evening. Simply to say that both of these positions I think are fraught with difficulties in the light of the overall teaching of the New Testament.

And so, do not constitute an explanation to this difficulty. So here is what I think is a reasonable response, an explanation of this difficulty, of the Samaritans having had two stages to their initiation as Christians.

And I think what we have here, and it has been very powerfully and I think eloquently argued by many, we have here what we might describe as a one-off departure from the norm.

Why is that? If you're going to say that this is a one-off departure you really need to explain why there would be such a departure. And it's here where we notice the importance or the significance of the fact that these were Samaritans.

We began by giving a little bit of that background. The conversion of Samaritans despised by the Jews deemed to be second-class citizens and that's the most generous language.

[43 : 41] The conversion of the Samaritans that the Samaritans had also accepted the Word of God was hugely significant in God's redemptive purposes. Remember the instructions of Jesus to His disciples that they be witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea to the Jews and Samaria to the Samaritans and to the ends of the earth.

Three distinct groups. The Jews, the Samaritans and the Gentiles. And so this was hugely significant that the Samaritans for the first time should have responded to the Gospel.

Significant but also fraught with danger. Would the Jewish believers accept the Samaritans into the fledgling church? Would the schism between them continue?

And would you have this very ugly scenario of two Christian churches developing in parallel? Or would the Samaritans be accepted but as very much second class citizens into the Christian church?

Such a dangerous possibility would be averted by an apostolic involvement and also in this experience of what we might call a Samaritan Pentecost.

[44 : 50] And this allowed Peter and John to return to Jerusalem and to report how the Samaritans had received the Spirit just like those who had received the Spirit in Jerusalem at Pentecost.

And so secure their full integration into the church as equal partners. And a similar scenario with apostolic involvement was played out in the conversion of Cornelius the first Gentile convert.

But I leave you to explore that for yourselves. So as we conclude the Samaritans also as we have been considering them conclude this spiritual rollercoaster ride.

They begin captivated by Simon. Captivated as we have suggested by the devil himself. They hear the good news concerning Jesus and are liberated as they put their trust in Jesus.

And then by the laying on of the hands of the apostles they receive the Holy Spirit so ensuring that they will be fully accepted and integrated into the church of Jesus Christ.

[46 : 03] This integration of the Samaritans it seems to be more a question of theological curiosity for us today. But isn't there a lesson also for us as we consider how God was so concerned that these despised people would be integrated into his church?

Is there not an application there for us that we should share that concern? That this church, this congregation would be a place where all, regardless of their background and issues and difficulties and problems and past hostilities, can be fully welcomed, fully received, and fully integrated into our fellowship.

This was clearly God's concern, God's heart for the Samaritans. And it remains his heart for the Samaritans of today. Well, at first sight, the passage that describes that we are considering, or we have considered, describes times and places and circumstances seemingly very different to our own.

And yet, is it so different? we too are surrounded by so many, captivated by the devil and his lies.

And we too have a message of good news that can be the means of securing their liberation.

And we too are presented with the challenge of doing all that is in our powers to receive and to integrate into our fellowship the most unlikely of converts that God would help us so to do.

[47 : 38] Let us pray.