



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Acts 8:1–25

“Simon the Sorcerer and the Faith That Does Not Save”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Would you take your Bibles and turn to Acts chapter 8, and we’ll read verse 1 through verse 25, for our Scripture reading this morning? Stephen has just preached his great sermon, and he has received as a result stoning to death. Those were vigorous days. Today, we go home and we have as the old cliché is “roast preacher” for our Sunday dinner. But then it was more vigorous and Stephen lost his life and Saul was one who was responsible for that. And so Luke continues his story by saying,

“And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church, which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial and made great lamentation over him. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison. Therefore, they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the Word.”

Now, Luke will guess an account of the ministry of one of these men. One of the great things about heaven is that we will hear the stories of these others that Luke passes by. He selects Philip to talk about his ministry, but notice there were many others who did the same thing.

“Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ unto them. And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them; and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed. And there was great joy in that city. But there was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one: To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, ‘This man is the great power of God.’ And to him they had regard, because that of long time he had bewitched them with sorceries.”

That Word “bewitched” is a Word that really means “to astound or amaze.”

“But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Then Simon himself believed also. And when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs, which were done. And again he was amazed. Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the Word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John, who when they were come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost: For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then laid they their hands on them and they received the Holy Ghost. And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money, saying, ‘Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost.’ But Peter said unto him, ‘Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: For thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity.’ Then

“Simon the Sorcerer and the Faith That Does Not Save” by S. Lewis Johnson
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answered Simon and said, ‘Pray ye to the Lord for me, that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me. And they, when they had testified and preached the Word of the Lord, returned to Jerusalem, and preached the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans.’”

May the Lord bless this reading of his Word and let’s bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee for the Word of God and for the message that is contained within it. And we thank Thee that Thou hast given it to us with the promise of the help of the Holy Spirit that we may understand it. Give us diligence to read it and to ponder it. And, Lord, we pray that thou wilt give us illumination and, also, the will and the power to be submissive to Thy truth. We thank Thee for the day in which we live and for the opportunities of it. We praise Thee for the daily vacation Bible school that has just concluded and the things that were accomplished in the teaching of the young people and the children that Thou didst put in our hands.

We thank Thee, particularly, for those who labored in that work. We give Thee praise and thanksgiving for devotion to the ministry of the Word of God; and how blessed we are to have them and to have those young people in our hands. And enable us, Lord, to measure up to the responsibility that we have. We thank Thee for the whole church of Christ. We pray Thy blessing upon the whole body, for this local manifestation of it and for other local manifestations, where the Lord Jesus Christ in his saviorhood is proclaimed.

And we praise Thee for the promises of the Word of God, which have to do with our day by day existence; that we have someone with whom we can walk and someone who is concerned for us, someone who is constantly available to us, as our great High Priest at the right hand of the throne of God in heaven. O God, give us the desire to fellowship with Him and to receive from Him the things that we need to live lives well pleasing to Him. Bless the ministry of the Word in this hour, the singing of the hymns, our time of fellowship together.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

[Message] Our subject this morning as we turn again to the book of the Acts is “Simon Magus and the Faith That Does Not Save.” In eras of spiritual unrest, it is fashionable to trifle with superstition and with miracle workers. One of the interesting things that the Bible sets forth for us is that in the last days, we may expect to find something of the same thing; for the Apostle John in the great Revelation, the last book of the Bible, commenting upon some of the things that will be characteristic of those days, describing the people of that time says, “Neither repented they of their murders, nor of their sorceries, nor of their fornication, nor of their thefts.” So the use of sorcery is one of the characteristics of the last days. It was so in the past; it will be so in the future again.

We are always, of course, troubled by the fortune tellers and the witches and those who assume that they have some knowledge of the future. Some of the best-known of the fortune tellers of our day are people like Jeane Dixon and Maurice Woodruff. It's very interesting to look back in the past and to recount some of the prophecies of the prophets, a few years after they make them. I have tried, through the years, to make a little collection of the prophecies of Jeane Dixon. They make some interesting reading. She has a few things that came close to coming to pass; but then every year you read in your paper and she will have her selection of prophecies again for the year. And there are many people who avidly read them and think well maybe some of these things will come to pass as prophesied.

I always think back to Maurice Woodruff. I don't know whether he is still living or not; but about fifteen years ago, he described his experiences as a child. When he was a child, he said, “I found out I had a third eye, right in the middle of my forehead. And as a baby, I used to rub that eye in my sleep. And I would rub it so much that the spot where it was got bruised.” He said, “It's always seeing things.” And now, speaking as an older man, he said, “In order for me to sleep at night, I have to take a lock of my hair and pull it down over that eye in order that I can sleep.” Well, Mr. Woodruff like so many of us, in his latter days, didn't have any hair on the top of his head. The poor fellow never got any sleep, I would imagine, since he had this open eye all of the time.

Well, sorcery or the use of power gained from the aid or control of evil spirits has characterized all of the ages because deep down within the heart of man, there is some sense of aspiration after spiritual things. But yet there is the absence, generally, of profound conviction. And so when we have an aspiration for spiritual things, but we have no profound conviction, the kind of conviction that would cause you to go to the Word of God and to ponder that Word, then, of course, we see the rise of the magicians and the sorcerers and others. And if anyone reads the newspapers today, he knows that we have a great deal of this in our society. Just look at the movies; movies like *The Exorcist* or *Ghostbusters* or *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, or *The Terminator*, with androids and things like this. This is characteristic of our society and people in Hollywood know that you folks are just the kind of people they like to have. You're interested in that kind of thing. But that usually goes with the absence of deep conviction, spiritually. In other words, some aspiration for the reality but not sufficient to really have a deep conviction concerning spiritual things.

Well, Simon Magus was a sorcerer. And the Samaritans were falling for his sorcery. He was, in a sense, the Samaritan answer to Judaea's Jesus. The Magi were a priestly class of people from Persia. Their religion was very similar to Zoroastrianism, which has, by the way, had a rebirth in the United States of America. Sorcery, as I say, indicates the absence of profound conviction but the presence of aspirations.

The New Testament preachers often came into contact with men like Simon Magus. And it's startling at first to realize that they were primarily Jewish people. One might ask why is that so, in the light of the fact that Israel was given the revelation of God, so why should they be more susceptible to this than others? Well, the reasons they were more susceptible to it is because they used that information in order to con people. They were con artists, just like we have in evangelicalism today many con artists. And having a better understanding of the true reality than others, they were able to use that information and use it to gain control over the minds and the interests of people of their day. So we have an Elymas the sorcerer, who swats by the side of Sergius Paulus, and later on, will have occasion to deal with the way in which Paul handles this Elymas the sorcerer. There were the

Ephesians’ magicians; and all of this; in spite of the fact that Paul says that Israel had the oracles of God.

Now, think of that? Here is a people who have the oracles of God, the great promises, but some of their people are going after sorcery. You cannot help but feel that here is something totally out of balance.

Well, when Simon Magus came among the hocus-pocus loving Samaritans, with their horoscopes and witches and books on demon possession and witchcraft, well, they responded to him. And, in fact, when he portrayed himself as “some great one” he astonished the people of Samaria. He had the greatest kind of public relations. And so on Saturday evening in the newspapers or whatever was the equivalent of it in Samaria, there would be things about Simon Magus, the great sorcerer, the great power of God, and the things that he could do. And those Samaritans were responsive to it. Do you think there is any of that today? Now, there is a great deal in our society that is very similar to this.

Well, let’s turn to the book of Acts, and see how this preaching deacon, Philip, and others dealt with Simon Magus. Remember, Stephen now has been put to death; stoned to death. Luke tells us that this is the occasion for a great persecution to take place and those who were in Jerusalem and in Judaea began to be scattered to other places. And they went out preaching the Word of God. So the persecutor acts as a sore of the fire of God. All of this was, undoubtedly, by the intent of God. You see, the apostles did not do what they should have done. They had been told that they were to be witnesses unto the Lord in Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria, and to the outer most parts of the earth. But they did not respond to the message that the Lord had given to them. And so God raised up, by persecution, some means by which his commission would be fulfilled. In other words, if the apostles will not fulfill Acts 1:8, God will fulfill Acts 1:8, because in the final analysis, Jerusalem is not the headquarters of the Christian church, Heaven is the headquarters of the Christian church. So God will work from heaven. He has always done that. If you look at the history of the Christian church,

you will find many things like this. God works in spite of the ways in which we seek to clog up the channels.

As for Saul, Luke says, “He made havoc of the church.” He entered into every house and haling men and women committed them to prison. He was a tough, resolute, Ho Chi Minh of the enemies or an Ayatollah Khomeini of the enemies of the Lord God, and he had no mercy upon the faithful.

At this point, Luke after commenting that those that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the Word, centers his attention upon the preaching of one of the deacons. His name is Philip. Stephen was a deacon who preached; Philip is also a deacon who preached. You know, from the Word of God, you see it is gifted men who do ministry, and the man doesn't have to be a deacon or he doesn't have to be an elder to preach the Word of God. If he has a gift from God, he preaches the Word. And so Stephen and Philip were deacons; but they were also preachers of the Word. And they fulfilled their spiritual gifts by preaching the Word.

It would be nice in Believers Chapel, if we had some deacons, who having the gift of the ministry of the Word of God, would minister the Word of God; and elders who, having the gift of ministry, would minister the Word of God. Ministry is by gifted men; not by officials, necessarily, but by gifted men. And these men were gifted men.

The evidence of their gift is the fruit that was born from their preaching. So Philip becomes a memorable illustration of those who went out preaching. He went to the Samaritans. They were half-castes. They were hated by the Jews more than the Gentiles were hated by them. Remember, when the Assyrians took the Northern Kingdom, they took captives. But then they colonized the Northern Kingdom with people drawn from other places; and the results of the following inter-marriages were the Samaritans; half-castes, we would call them. And, as I say, these were hated by the Jews, more than even they hated the Gentiles. So in the 5th verse, Philip went down to the city of Samaria and he preached Christ unto them.

Now, he takes Stephen’s place. The church made him a deacon; the Lord made him an evangelist and he preaches the Word of God. One can sense the distinction between the preaching of Philip and the ministry of Simon Magus. Simon drew attention to himself. Philip preached Christ. Philip sought to draw men away to the Lord; Simon drew men to himself. That’s the difference between true preaching and false preaching. So Philip preached Christ and he was effective. We read, “The people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the signs which he was doing.” This city was set right by the preaching. And characteristic of Philip’s preaching was the accomplishment of mighty signs and miracles. These were intended to confirm the ministry of the Word of God. They were not to be simply miracles by which men were amazed; but they were designed to authenticate the message that Stephen and Philip and the apostles were giving.

When Paul said, “The signs of an apostle I have wrought in your midst,” he means, I did those things, which God has given us as authentication of our ministry. So the miracles of signs, the miracles of raising people from the dead, of restoration of life, of speaking in tongues, these characterized the ministry in the early church as authenticating miracles. And the people gave heed to Philip, and there was a remarkable movement that was taking place; unclean spirits came out of many that were possessed with them, men who were paralyzed were healed of their paralysis, those that were lame were healed, and there was great joy in the city of Samaria. But there was a man there by the name of Simon Magus. And he was very jealous over the things that had happened because he had come into Samaria and with perhaps some simple tricks, perhaps some miracles that he performed by the use of a knowledge of chemistry that others did not have, by pulling a few rabbits out of the hat, or whatever kind of sorcery he may have had, he had cast the spell of his personality over the city by self-advertisement. He didn’t need any PR men. He was the PR man himself. He gave out that “Himself was some great one,” so Luke says. So if you listen to Simon, you were told by him, “I am an internationally known worker of miracles. I’ve had campaigns in many, many cities. And if you will come to my tent meeting, I will be happy to perform some mighty signs for you.”

And he was able to get quite a following. In fact, the people gave heed to Simon Magus from the least to the greatest and they said, “This man is the power of God which is great.”

Now, that sign and that statement, made with reference to Simon Magus, in the English text, does not appear as great as it really is. Because Origen, way back in the beginning of the Christian era, to speak, spoke about Simon Magus and made some comments concerning him, and this is tradition. And, of course, we don't know how true this tradition is but Origen said, I am sorry, Jerome said that Simon had said, “I am the Word of God. I am omnipotent. I am the all things of God.” But this expression, “The power of God which is called great,” that's the way the Greek text puts it, that is an expression of the fact that he is an incarnation of the Lord God. In other words, Judaea may talk about that Jesus as an incarnation of God; but when you come to Samaria, I am the power of God that is called great. And he had convinced them of the things that he had been talking about.

Well, when Philip came and there was this mighty turning of the city to the Lord, we read in the 13th verse, “Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip and wondered,” that is, he was amazed, “beholding the miracles and signs which were done.” So they believed Philip preaching. Simon believed him, as he saw him working these mighty miracles. One of the reasons that Simon was, no doubt, attached to the ministry of Philip was because he knew how to work miracles. He knew all of the sham miracles; he knew all of the tricks that magicians performed. He knew all of the things there were claimed by sorcerers. He knew them very well, because he was the great master of that. But when he looked at what was happening in Philip's preaching and accompanying it, he realized that this was the real thing, or this is something that I know nothing about. I'm an amateur, so far as this professional is concerned. So he, too, believed, when he saw Philip working the miracles. And I would imagine that Philip was greatly impressed when Simon Magus came forward and said, “I'd like to be baptized, too, because I believed.” And he was marveling at the miracles and signs, which were done.

Now, it is possible to conceive that Simon became a true believer at this point. I do have some friends who feel that that is true. They honestly do. They look at this passage and they say, it says he believed. So I would think that that’s exactly what happened. He believed truly. But it was not a very deep kind of faith. Well, it’s possible to take that view.

I’d like to take a little stronger view, with reference to it, and a little different approach. I would like to suggest and there’s an element of doubt about this but not about the essence of his faith, it was weak, under any circumstance, I’d like to suggest to you that what he had was only a profession of faith; that he believed in the sense that he gave credence to the things that were preached, but there was no true faith of the heart. In fact, in a moment, Peter will say, “Your heart is not right with the Lord God.”

And so I would suggest to you that he is a professing believer; that he has made the proper confession of faith. He may even have had, objectively, a conviction that the message is true. But he had not really, as we say “theologically” relied upon our Lord Jesus Christ. He had what is called *notitia*, “knowledge,” and assents to the facts of the faith, but no *feducia*, no real trust of himself to them. So he too, then, was put on the roles of the church in Samaria; and don’t you know that Philip, for evidently he was deceived by him, because he baptized him, that Philip was lifted up when he saw that this, the greatest unbeliever in the whole city, has now signed on with him and the movement with which he was one of the major parts.

So I can just imagine that he went down to “Eastern Union” to send a telegram back to Jerusalem or to Mosaic Express or whatever you wanted to get the information to the apostles as soon as possible, and he said, “Simon Magus, the one who claims to be ‘the power of God called great’ is now one of us. I have immersed Simon Magus. Great things are happening up here.” And I can imagine those apostles in Jerusalem, they had a lot of experience with this kind of thing, said, “You know, we better go up there and see what’s really happening up there.” And so they sent Peter and John up to have a look at what was happening. And they discovered that which is so often true, the church in Samaria, was being conned by this man.

Philip was a better evangelist, perhaps, than he was a teacher, because evidently Simon is not a true believer. That seems evident from the things that follow. Notice what happens when the apostles sent unto them Peter and John. They came down and when they looked around and when they saw the condition of the professing believers in Samaria, they recognized immediately that one thing was missing, they didn't have the Holy Spirit. Here was a movement that was characterized by no presence of the Holy Spirit in power. And so the first thing that they do is that they pray for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. And Luke adds the Words, “For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.” And so the apostles coming, laid hands upon those who'd made profession of faith, and we read, “They received the Holy Spirit.”

Now, this is a very interesting thing. And what is interesting about it is what follows. “And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money.” I'd like for you to notice that Word “saw” because when this happened, Simon was standing around and he saw that these individuals, evidently, have a transforming experience when the apostles laid hands upon them.

Now, I would suggest to you that what he saw that convinced him that there was reality to this was that they began to speak in tongues. Now, it doesn't say in Acts 8, that they did speak in tongues. So we have to acknowledge, just a little bit of speculation here. but the fact that the text says that Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Ghost was given, we have to say that there was some outward visible evidence of the coming of the Holy Spirit. And since in Acts chapter 2, we've already had that and in Acts chapter 10, we will have it in Cornelius' house, the Gentiles there have the experience of the possession of the Holy Spirit and speak in tongues. And since, in Acts chapter 19, we again have it when the apostle Paul laid hands upon those who were John's disciples, John the Baptist's disciples, and they began to speak in tongues, I suggest to you that this is the fourth instance of speaking in tongues in the book of Acts. There are only four. And the interesting thing about it, also, is that on each occasion, Jewish people were present. Now, if you go back to the Old Testament, to a book like Isaiah, and read chapter 28, you will see that in the Old

Testament, it was prophesized by God that he would speak to this people in their disobedience by strange tongues. And the apostle Paul cites that passage in 1 Corinthians chapter 14. And there he reminds the Corinthians that tongues are not for believers; but tongues are for unbelievers. Chapter 14, verse 21 and 22, makes that very plain.

So what is Paul saying and what is happening in the book of Acts. Tongues, the gift of tongues, the ability to speak in a known language which you have never studied, that is a miraculous thing. If I were to suddenly begin speaking in Swedish to you, and there was someone in the audience who was a Swede, and he recognized that I was speaking Swedish, and speaking it fluently, and I were to tell him and he were to know this to be the truth, that I had never studied Swedish, he would say, “This is a miracle.” Well, that was what speaking in tongues was, not ecstatic speech, not gibberish. Anybody can speak in gibberish. All you have to do is to learn that.

Actually, speaking in tongues took place long before the era of the apostles. It was characteristic of certain Eastern religions before the time of the apostles and the time of our Lord. And as you well know, it’s part of the Mormon doctrine. And the Mormon’s are not Christians. They are not Trinitarians at all; they are Unitarians. So what we have here is a miracle; and it’s a miracle connected with the nation Israel. God was speaking to Israel. He was saying to them, “You have been disobedient. You have crucified the Messiah. I am speaking now, through a people with a different tongue, through the Gentiles.” That’s the whole purpose of speaking in tongues.

So this happened and there, when they received the Holy Spirit, Simon saw the speaking in tongues and, after all, Simon was not interested in repentance and a right relationship with the Lord God; he was interested in carrying on his conning ministry. He was a magician. He was a sorcerer. And here he saw, “I have insight into something that will really make me great, not only in Samaria but all over in this part of the world.”

So what did he do? He did the same thing that anyone would do like to have the preeminence in unreality. Like Themisticles, who was sleepless because every time Miltiades walked up and down the streets in Athens, the people cheered him and he wanted the cheering for himself.

And so Simon, hearing that Peter and John were down at the Samaria Hilton, I don't really think they were, I really think they were probably in some bed and breakfast place and that's where Simon Magus lived. He lived down at the Samaria Hilton because he had conned those Samaritans out of a whole lot of money in the past. At any rate, he came into the presence of Simon Peter, and he plunked down a little hand full of gold, a little sack of gold, on the table in front of the apostle. And he said, “What will you take for the Holy Ghost? And if this is not enough, there's more where that came from.”

Now, we know from church history, there is such a thing as simony, some people pronounce it ‘Sim-ony, Simony. Simony is the crime of buying and selling church office. We have a lot of it in the days of the Reformers and the days of Middle Ages, in which people sold ecclesiastical preferments and also bought them. This is where it derives from. He, of course, was a man whose heart was not right with God; and he thought that he could buy spiritual blessing. So he stands in front of the apostle and he discovers that Peter is not the kind of man that he anticipated him to be. You see, there is such a thing as craving power, for the privilege of bestowing it, and there is another kind of craving of spiritual power, for the glorification of God. Simon wanted power in order to display himself as the great one in Samaria and over that part of the world. So he asked that he may have the power to bestow the Holy Spirit. “Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost.” He didn't say, “O, I want the presence of the Holy Spirit of God in my life? Show me how I may receive the Holy Spirit of God and his ministry in my life? Show me how I may properly repent and confess and enter into relationship with the Lord God?” No, it's not that. “I want the power to bestow this Holy Spirit on others.”

You know, there are some people in the Christian church, in Believers Chapel, perhaps, I don't anyone that I'm talking about but if it happened then it can happen now, people who are interested in power in a local church. And so they go through all of the motions in order to have a place of influence, a place of power. That's very often true of church work. People want power, influence. And, of course, it also happens in the Daughters of the American Revolution, too or the

Colonial Dames or other societies like that. Martha's not here; she a DAR member, so I'm saying this while she's not here. She'll hear about it, I know. But any kind of organization always attracts people who like power. And, in the church, it's the same thing. People like power, a place of influence.

I'd say, when he came to Peter, he came to somebody of a different spirit. So when he plopped the money down before Peter, Peter said, “Your money perish with you!” Now, that word “perish” is the same word, same root, found in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son; that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish.” That is, go to perdition, “but have everlasting life.” And so, Peter says, “Your money go to perdition with you.” That is, there is no doubt in Peter's mind that's where Simon's going. And take your money with you when you go, he says. And that, by the way, is a wish, expressed by the apostle. “May your money perish with you, because you have thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money.”

Now, I suggest to you as I suggested earlier, that Simon was not really a Christian man in spite of that term, believed. Notice, Peter says, “Your money perish with you.” He says the money is going to perish; you're going to perish with it. That's his wish. And secondly, he says, “Your heart is not right with God.” verse 22, “Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you: For you are in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity.” “Your heart is not right in the sight of God.” Thirdly, Peter calls upon him to repent. If you go through the book of Acts, and look up the term repentance, which occurs a number of times, you will find that it always used of individuals who are unsaved. And he is calling upon him to repent.

And when, finally, Peter says to him, “You ought to pray God, if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you,” what does Simon do? He says, “Pray ye to the Lord for me,” verse 24. In other words, he's a person who doesn't have a first-hand relationship with the Lord; and he recognizes it. “Peter, you pray for me.” And, notice, too, what he said. He said, “Pray for me that none of the things which you have spoken come upon me.” He's concerned about the consequences of his sin; but not about his sin. He doesn't go to the Lord and say, “O Lord, I see, I have

misunderstood you. I confess my evil and iniquity. My heart is not right with you. I ask for the forgiveness of my sin, that I may have eternal life.” No! Nothing like that, but don’t let these consequences fall upon me. Just like Judas, of whom we read, that he regretted himself. Now, the Authorized Version renders that, repented. It’s really the Greek word for regret. Judas never truly repented. What he regretted was what was happening in his heart, as a result of his betrayal of the Lord. And so he regretted the things that were happening because he was very, very unhappy and the judgment of God was beginning in his inmost being. Regret is a far cry from biblical repentance.

Peter, later on, in Jerusalem, talking about the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and seeking to sum up the discussion that took place at the Jerusalem conference will say, “God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Spirit, even as he did unto us; and put no difference between us and them,” that is, the Gentiles, “purifying their hearts by faith.” Simon didn’t have any faith. He didn’t have any purified heart.

So let me sum up by saying this. We have an example here, of how near a man can be to the kingdom, yet drift by. How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation, which began to be spoken by the apostles, was confirmed unto us by them that heard him? We have an illustration of a person who was as our hymn puts it, “almost persuaded.” “Harvest is passed, almost persuaded, doom comes at least. Almost cannot avail, almost is but to fail. Sad, sad that bitter wail, almost, but lost.”

Simon’s failure was a failure of the heart. He had believed, that is, he had acknowledged the outward truth of the things that Stephen and Philip had preached. He had been baptized in water and yet he was headed for eternal perdition. It is a warning to all nominal Christians; trusting in ceremony, trusting in tradition, trusting in your confirmation, trusting in your baptism, trusting in your sitting at the Lord’s Table, trusting in the fact that your name is on the roll of some church and not realizing and failing to realize that a personal relationship with the Lord is also required.

Simon wasn’t a blatant hypocrite. As a matter of fact, he was in the middle ground. He had acknowledged the objective truth of the things that Philip was preaching. That’s why he was

baptized. It's a warning to all such. When the Bible speaks of faith, it speaks of knowledge of certain facts, concerning the Lord Jesus Christ and his ministry, assent to those facts and trust in the reality of them in a personal way. All of those things make up faith. Listen to what John Calvin says. He says, “The knowledge of Christ is a doctrine not of the tongue, but of the life. And it is not apprehended merely with the understanding and memory, like the other sciences; but is only received when it possesses the whole soul and finds a seat and residence in the innermost affection of the heart.” He's not denying the fact that we must know something, in order to be saved, he's just saying to know it is not enough. Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf, the great Moravian, said, “A grain of living faith is worth more than a pound of historic knowledge.” Luther said, “Faith is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, so that it is impossible for it not to do good works incessantly.”

And, of course, one of the greatest, most vivid illustrations of this, is John Wesley's experience, a model of moral rectitude, fasted, prayed, preached, a missionary, and still his spirit was in a state of constant unrest. He had been baptized, he had been confirmed, he had been ordained, and still, he didn't have effectual faith for salvation. His faith consisted in earnestly striving to keep the Commandments. It was devoid of the assurance of salvation and did not come from relying on Christ's righteousness and not our own. And, then, of course, one evening, in a famous meeting, he heard Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans being read, and later he said, “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ. Christ alone for salvation and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins even mine and saved me from the law of sin and death.” And before that decisive turning point in his life, he described himself as, “Almost a Christian.”

It is possible for us in Believers Chapel to sit here Sunday after Sunday and be almost a Christian, but lost. May God help us to realize that nothing less than the actual reception of the Holy Spirit is genuine Christianity. He that hath not the Spirit of Christ is none of His.

May I ask you a personal question? Do you have the Holy Spirit as an indwelling presence? Do you know him as an indwelling presence in your life? Do you have the assurance of the forgiveness of sins, granted you by the Holy Spirit? Have you felt conviction for your sin? Have you

felt that you stand under the judgment of God? Under guilt and condemnation and headed for a Christless eternity? And has the burden of that rolled from your back, with the knowledge that Christ has died for sinners? And have you fled to him and to his cross for deliverance, for peace, and for the forgiveness of sins, for all of the desires to please God, out of gratitude that characterize true believing Christians? It may be that you, too, are almost a Christian.

We encourage you to come to Christ. If there's any question in your mind, make it certain. “Him that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out,” the Lord Jesus said. Come to him! He will not cast you out. Come to him! He'll give you the assurance of everlasting life, and your life from that moment will be different, made different, by the reality of the presence of God within.

May we stand for the benediction?

[Prayer] We thank Thee, Lord, for these solemn words, which have been given to us by Luke, the historian. O, how grateful we are that we are able to ponder these things, and to examine our own lives in the light of them. Deliver us from “almost a Christian.” May we have the experience of Wesley, the heart strangely warmed as we reflect upon the sufficient of the blood that was shed for our sins, for my sins. Go with us Lord.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.