

Part 15: The Fault Lines of Faith

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My guess is that most of you have heard of the San Andreas Fault. It's of particular interest in films and history because of its geological instability. The fault line stretches for nearly 800 miles along the California coast along which there are over 5,000 earthquakes a year. Most of those are minor. But some, like the ones in 1906 and 1989 have been catastrophic.

The fault line follows the meeting point of the two largest tectonic plates in the world. As those plates rub up against one another they create friction and tension which at some point inevitably erupts into an earthquake.

Scientists have identified certain hot-spots along the fault lines and tried to mitigate the potential effects of the earthquake with building codes and development guidelines. But the biggest concern for geologists are the areas which haven't had an earthquake in hundreds of year.

It's in those spots, invisible to the naked eye, where pressure and energy have been building up for centuries. The concern is that one day all of that energy will erupt and they will have no way to prepare for it.

When Christians come to faith in Jesus Christ, we know that there will be places of tension between us and the world. Sometimes those fault lines are really clear and expected. We expect to feel the tension of faith in a world of sight, the weight of exclusivity in a pluralistic world, and of biblical love like what we examined in Song of Songs, amidst an oversexualized identity. But sometimes—those fault lines are more hidden. Sometimes they run clearly outside in our world—but sometimes they run within our own hearts.

How will we prepare for those moments? Can we prepare? Or are we like left to chance like those along the fault line? Well, today we return to our study in the book of Acts and the tectonic plate of the church in Jerusalem is moving out into the broader world. It's crossing city walls, and ethnic barriers. But as we see the pinch points of the church in this passage—we get insight into what to expect in our own lives and how to prepare so that we are not shaken ourselves.

This will be our main point today: **The word of God crosses the dividing lines of our world and our hearts.**

We will examine five such fault lines in our passage today—and just to prepare you we will spend the majority of our time on the first two. But as the gospel goes forward we will see the fault lines between: **Peace and Power, Belief and Belonging, Gift and Gain, Repentance and Remorse, and Confidence and Confusion.**

Nearly 1700 years ago, one pastor famously said: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." In other words, as Christians die for their faith—the church grows. Is that true? Well, the last time we were in the book of Acts, we read of the first Christian to die for his faith, Stephen. And our passage today begins in the immediate aftermath of it: **Acts 8:1-3**, "And Saul approved of [Stephen's] execution. And

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, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison."

We have seen sporadic persecution of the church in Acts so far—but not it's an organized opposition. A man named Saul began a campaign to get rid of the Christians—but as the blood flowed, and as the prisons began to fill, the church grew!

This is the first fault line we see in today: **Peace and Power.**

We just came out of an election cycle and the rhetoric from each side was: if we want peace—give us the power. Human power, we believe, always leads to peace. But notice who had the power in this passage. Pay attention to the words in verses 1 and 2. What did Saul and the world have? The power to make great persecution. What did the church of Jesus have—great lamentation.

The enemies of the church had all the power. So in order to get the peace they wanted—they attempted to persecute the church. They were to rid themselves of the annoyance of this resurrection business and the power they used was effective to cause the Christians to leave Jerusalem. We see that everyone left except the disciples. They had effectively isolated the apostles from their supporters, and they had sent a bunch of baby-Christians out into the world without their leaders.

But notice what happened: **Acts 8:4-8**, "Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city."

The principle of this story can be stated pretty clearly: If you attempt to find peace by using the power of the world—you'll never find it. But if you walk in the power of God—you'll find peace everywhere you go even when it's not peaceful.

The world had the power to dig up the dandelion of the church—but all the managed to do was blow the seeds of the dandelion throughout the region!

The power of the gospel is not tied to one earthly place of powerful person (outside of Jesus). Which means that the power of the gospel lies in the heart of every Christian who believes! Everywhere the Christian goes, the power of the God goes. The world had power that produced no peace. But the church had the power of God which was broader than even the apostles. They apostles were doing damage control—but these ordinary Christians, like Philip, were now powerfully preaching the gospel and demonstrating powerful signs!

Worldly power has the ability to displace you from your location—but the power of God never takes away your vocation. Peer pressure, and real persecution will try and move you out of your comfort zone—but for the Christian our comfort zone is wherever we are obeying God.

These men and women left behind their lives in Jerusalem—but their peace was in their life in Christ. The Bible would prohibit us from romanticizing persecution as if we should seek after it. But only a

sovereign God can bring peace to a persecuted people. If you want peace—we must find it in God's power. Not in the world's! You must find it in your Christian identity and purpose, not in anything else. These men and women left their Jerusalem identity but their peace was in their Christian identity.

And the result isn't just peace—but joy! The world's power was frustrated, but the church's power produced joy. And as the world saw the peace of the church—they came to believe in the message of the church!

Luke tells us more of what happened in Samaria: **Acts 8:9-12**, "But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, 'This man is the power of God that is called Great.' And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and in the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women."

God's peace sets us free from worldly power. Notice how we are introduced to this man named Simon in Samaria and who the word "great" shows up again. He said he was somebody great, everyone from the least to the greatest paid attention, and he was called, "the power of God that is called great."

Records from church history speak of this man and how he, literally, had these people spell bound. They were under his power—whether by his trickery or by demonic influence. But what breaks the power of the devil? And what pulls the veil back on the false power of man? The preached message of Jesus Christ!

Here the spell was broken when Philip preached of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God. There, and there alone is the only power that can bring peace. And verse **13** tells us that even Simon himself came to believe and was amazed. So here we have pagan magicians and Samaritan villages hearing the same message of Jesus and responding in the same way the church in Jerusalem did.

But this leads to our second fault line: **Belief and Belonging**.

How do you belong to a group of people? How do you belong to an identity? If you're a business professional you might feel like you'll only belong if you can close that deal or reach that sales benchmark. If you're a college student you'll only belong with your peer group if you can get that internship or if you can attend the right kind of parties. School aged kids might feel like they can only belong to their friend group if they wear certain clothes, or treat certain groups of people certain ways.

But how does one belong to the church? What are the standards of acceptance? This is why Luke focuses on what seems to be an odd aside in this passage: **Acts 8:14-17**, "Now when the apostles of Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit."

Now, if you've been with us in the book of Acts—this pattern is not the ordinary pattern of belonging to the church. Peter gives the ordinary pattern of belonging to Jesus and to his people in **Acts 2:38**, "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's the pattern, repent, believe (that's what baptism is in light of) and you'll receive the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit was the true mark of belonging to God's people. Paul calls it the seal of your salvation in Ephesians, and he says that you are sealed with him when you first believe the gospel. But that's why this passage is so odd—there's a delay between their repentance, belief, baptism and filling of the Holy Spirit. Why is that?

Well, it goes back to belonging. If you've moved here from California—you've probably experienced this in part. You've probably felt like it's nearly impossible to convince Montanans that you're one of them. Why? Because there's a narrative out there that Californians are coming here to ruin Montana.

Well, take that tension and multiply it a thousand fold and you have the tension between the Jews and the Samaritans. God's people Israel split after the reign of David in the Old Testament into two associations of tribes: Judah in the south and Israel in the north. Judah's center was Jerusalem and they were the "pure" tribe. Israel was conquered by Assyria and ultimately they ended up intermarrying with other nations. They watered down Jewish worship, they lost their Jewish identity, and they set up competing places of worship claiming that they knew the right place to worship God.

This lost tribe became the Samaritans. They were called half-bloods. They were absolutely loathed by the Jews. So the idea that these Samaritans, these fallen racially disgusting half-Jews, could be restored back into God's promise would have been absolutely offensive to the Jews in Jerusalem.

But remember when the disciples asked Jesus when he would restore the kingdom of Israel in Acts 1? He didn't directly answer their question and instead said: **Acts 1:8**, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth."

When will the kingdom be restored? When the Holy Spirit comes as a result of the message of the disciples in both Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. The general pattern Peter gives of belonging: repentance, belief, and the Holy Spirit is the norm without delay throughout the whole book of Acts with a few exceptions. First, the believing Jews at Pentecost when the Spirit fell on the first converts in Jerusalem. Second, these first believing Christians in Judea and in Samaria when the Spirit fell at the hands of the apostles. Third, when Cornelius, the Gentile Roman soldier, believes in Acts 10.

Why did the Apostles go to verify this? To show that the only way to belong to the church is to believe. That's it. There was nothing more the Samaritans needed to do to be restored to God. When their faith and baptism was confirmed—they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Finally, God's promise to restore all Israel was fulfilled.

This is important for us because you can belong in myriads of ways to multiple things. But you can only belong to the church through belief in Jesus. That's it. The world's standards are always changing—you've got to meet their terms. But the terms of the gospel are: believe, be baptized in the name of Jesus, and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

And to have those three things is to belong to God's people. Fully, even though we are all still works in progress. If you want to know more about what it looks like to belong to God and to his church—I'd encourage you to sign up for our church essentials class.

Notice here our third fault line, **Gift and Gain**.

Simon, who we professes faith and is baptized--is shown to have a fundamental misunderstanding of the faith he claimed to profess. **Acts 8:18-21**, "Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, 'Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.' But Peter said to him, 'May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.'"

Everyone fears the external fault lines of persecution--but we often miss the internal fault lines of our own heart. Simon joined by the visible responses of belief and baptism—but his heart saw the gospel as something he could gain for himself instead of a free gift of God.

While Simon was amazed—his amazement was misplaced. He didn't see Jesus as a gift given by faith to the needy—instead he saw Jesus as a path to regain his own greatness. It's my interpretation that Simon's unbelieving heart was shown most clearly in that he didn't receive the Holy Spirit. My guess is that if he did receive it, he probably would have tried to use it in such a way immediately.

This is why Peter responds so harshly. Simon should be first concerned that he himself has the Holy Spirit. Not because Simon needed the extra gift of Christianity—but because the Spirit is the essential gift of Christianity. Paul says that if anyone does not have the Spirit, they do not belong to Jesus!

There are no false conversions in the church. When God saves a dead heart and brings them to faith in Jesus Christ and fills them with the Spirit—they will endure in faith. But even though there are no false conversions—there are false converts like Simon.

There are those who want in their salvation what they seem to give up in their conversion. Remember it was Simon who once entertained the crowds with his greatness—and here's his way back to greatness! Here's the way he will regain his own story and feel good about his relationship with God in the process! He wanted his own authority back.

But our greatest gain is the gift of salvation. We are placed under God's great authority. Not even the apostles had authority over the Spirit. Did you notice that? They didn't summon him or command him—they prayed to God that the believers might be filled with the Spirit—and God was faithful to do what only he can do.

We give up a lot in coming to Christ. And our tendency will be to use Christ as the tool wherein we regain our greatness, our power, and our position. But Christ—the gift freely given—is our gain. There is nothing more beautiful to us than Jesus! I wonder how many of us attempt to use our salvation to purchase back what we lost instead of using our salvation to walk in light of what we have already been given? May we say with the Psalmist (**Psalms 73:25**), "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you."

Our fourth fault line is seen in Simon's response: **Repentance and Remorse**. Notice Peter's call to action and the deafness of Simon's response. **Acts 8:22-24**, "Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." And Simon answered, 'Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.'"

The gospel of Jesus crosses racial lines, gender lines, political lines, and national borders. Christians are diverse—but Christianity is not. There are not multiple strains of Christianity. While we must be wise to engage culture with our language—the message of Christianity spreads across all cultures: Repent and be saved.

As in Jerusalem, so in Samaria. As in Missoula, so in Montreal. Repent and seek the Lord's forgiveness.

At this point, Simon is caught. He was so motivated for public praise—but what he received instead was public rebuke! His heart was laid open—and it was not great.

Maybe you've been there before. I know I have. You know that your true self has shown—and now people see it. And no one likes that. And we would do anything to not have that experience. But remorse over our sin is not the same as biblical repentance.

What's the difference between remorse and repentance? Remorse often stops at how man sees us, but repentance acknowledges how God sees us. What did Peter tell Simon to do (vs. 22): "Repent therefore and pray to the Lord." And how did Simon respond (vs. 24): "Pray for me to the Lord than nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

He doesn't get it! He can't get his eyes past man! He doesn't care what the Lord says—he fears what Peter says. He was told to pray to God, and yet he appeals to Peter to pray on his behalf!

Brothers and sisters, Paul says in **2 Corinthians 7:10**, "Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death."

When we realize our sin is first against God—we realize that there is only one man who can do anything about it! Jesus Christ the God-man! We can spend our lives trying to save face and earn the favor of every other person on this whole planet. But our sin is meant to show us that no one else can save. Let that remorse drive you to Jesus!

When we realize the size of our sin, then we have to see our need for grace and grace alone. As the old hymn says, "Might I hide my blushing face, while his dear cross appears; dissolve my heart in thankfulness and melt mine eyes to tears.//But drops of tears can ne'er repay the debt of love I owe. Here, Lord, I give myself away; 'tis all that I can do."

And now we see our final fault line: **Confidence and Confusion**.

I know in this room there are perhaps many in here who wonder, "Am I Simon? Am I one who believes, who has been baptized, who has followed with the church but one who will be turned away and perish?"

The unfortunate reality is that some of you might be. Just as Philip and the apostles did, we in the church try to make sure that those who are called as members are genuine members--but only God sees the heart.

Which is why we need to warning of Peter. If you think that to be you, what will you do? This passage is here not to confuse us, or cause us to focus on ourselves. Instead, it's calling us to the simple response of faith. We can confidently focus on the greatness of the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ and whether for the first time or for the five thousandth time--we can repent and cling to Jesus!

Peter told Simon, "you have neither part nor lot in this matter." But the Greek word for "matter," is the word "logos." It's the word for "word." You have neither part nor lot in this word. Why? Because he's not believing the word!

If you look back up through this passage, notice all the times the word is doing the work, the word is being proclaimed, it's being preached, it's being believed, it's being received, it's being paid attention to!

He's not suffering from some hidden undiscerned sin! He's suffering from not believing the word. Which is why Luke closes this narrative this way: **Acts 8:25**, "Now when they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans."

The word wins. We have a fault line running straight through our heart and straight through our world—but the word has come so that we might know that we are safe. We stand firm on the promise of Jesus. If you want to make it through the pinch points of life—stick close to Jesus and his word.

You can try to guess where these fault lines are and stand in constant fear. Or you can let the Bible make sense of your life. I love the way John Calvin put it when he said he'd rather limp along the path of scripture than sprint with all speed outside of it.

How will you know power when the world's power seems opposed to you? God's word will remind you of his power. How will you know you belong truly to God and his people? His word will call you to believe in the message of Christ and him crucified and of the gift of the Spirit. How will you know the wonderful gift of Jesus? In his word....

The message of salvation gives us everything we need to navigate the hidden fault lines of our own heart--and the obvious ones of our world. It gives us confidence that we are saved, it wins us to Christ, fills us with his Spirit, joins us with the fellowship of the believers and secures us for what is to come.