

The Expansion of the Church

by Steve Gallagher

Steve Gallagher's sermon explores how persecution led to the expansion of the church, emphasizing the transformative power of faith amidst adversity.

Duration: 1:02:50

Scripture: Psalm 139:1

Topics: "God's Providence", "Faithfulness Rewarded"

Description

This sermon emphasizes the importance of God seeing and understanding the depths of our hearts, highlighting the blessings and rewards He bestows upon His faithful followers. It explores the story of Simon Magus and the Ethiopian eunuch to illustrate God's discernment, judgment, and giving nature towards His people, encouraging believers to trust in His perfect knowledge and provision.

Transcript

Let's open with the word of prayer. Lord, I just want to say that I love you today. I love you very much, Lord, because you hear my cries.

As the psalmist said, I love you because you hear my cries. You know what goes on in our hearts, Lord. You know how to judge us correctly, how to use us and help us and guide us and discipline us.

Thank you, Lord, for all your dealings with me, with others. I pray that you will help us once again. Help us to open up your word, Lord, and to bring forth out of the treasure that's in your word.

These little anecdotes and stories that Luke shares. Lord, bring truth to light, and please impart that truth into our hearts, into our inner being. Lord, move us and change us inside.

We're not looking for more head knowledge, although some of it's helpful. It's what you can speak to our hearts through these messages that matters. I pray, Lord, that you use this message today, for different folks who need what's going to be shared.

In Jesus' name, amen. Today, we're going to be in Acts Chapter 8, the expansion of the church today. Last week, when we were going through the story of Stephen being martyred and so on, we were introduced to a rising star in Judaism, a young man, well, relatively young, probably in his late 30s would be my guess, but a young man who was a rising star.

He had been very involved in the whole culture there in Jerusalem, even though he was from a different part of the Roman world. His name was Saul, and he was from Tarsus. He had been somewhat involved in the persecution, the martyrdom of Stephen.

It seems as though he developed a taste for blood through that experience. Let's begin reading here these first three verses in Chapter 8. I'm going to read it in the amplified, these three verses because there's a couple of verbs in here that the English just does not grasp the full weight of the meaning of what the Greek meant by these words. Saul was not only consenting to Stephen's death, he was pleased and entirely approving.

That's one of those Greek words right there. That's what it really means. Pleased and entirely approving.

On that day, a great and severe persecution broke out against the church which was in Jerusalem and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria except the apostles. A party of devout men with others helped to carry out and bury Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul shamefully treated and laid waste the church continuously with cruelty and violence and entering house after house, he dragged out men and women and committed them to prison.

Whereas the Living Bible puts it a little more descriptively there. Paul was like a wild man going everywhere to devastate the believers. Now, Saul had witnessed a few things with this young man named Stephen.

He saw this godly and innocent man with the face of an angel who prayed God's mercy and forgiveness for the very men who were stoning him to death. He saw this man brutally killed and one would think that there would be some human sympathy in his heart. But there's something about the pharisaical system, something about self-righteousness in the human heart that can become so powerful, the passion that it can override any kind of human sympathy.

That seems to be the case with Saul because he seemed to really develop a bloodthirst for Christians. He established or initiated, I should say, this persecution of the church. This persecution seemingly was directed mostly at the Hellenized Jews that were living there in Jerusalem.

As I said before, I'd come back from around the Roman world, back to live in Jerusalem and had met the Lord there and were part of the church there. It probably wasn't hard for them to get singled out. They probably stood out to other Hebrew Jews and people would just know.

I remember when Kathy and I moved to Eastern Kentucky a few years ago, and man, did we stand out like a couple of sore thumbs. People from California just don't fit in with people in the Appalachians. It was just obvious.

Even though we could dress the same and everything just was obvious, as soon as we opened our mouth, we didn't belong there and we weren't part of that culture. Anyway, I'm sure it was like that in Jerusalem. When this persecution came, it did something.

It drove the believers out from Jerusalem. But even the Hebrew Christians who were from Jerusalem, it even affected them because this incident was the final breach between the church and Judaism. This was it.

Now, even the Pharisees didn't want anything to do with them. In fact, the Christians would never again enjoy the favor of the people like they had earlier. Really, the mission to the Jewish nation was for all intents and purposes over with after this incident.

But on the positive side, this martyrdom of Stephen and this persecution that Saul initiated also had some positive benefits. You see in verses 1 and 4, this word scattered, which is the same Greek term that's used when someone's out sowing seed. A farmer out in the field throwing seeds around, it's the same word that you would use.

This persecution caused these Christians to, if I could say it like this, get out of their comfort zone and force them to go back out to the Roman world where they had probably lived and been raised and so on. But what happened out of that, what came out of that was just like seed, they sprouted and flourished everywhere they went. Later on, as Paul begins going out there, he starts running into these people who had been affected in these early days of the Pentecostal revival there in Jerusalem.

I want to read a lengthy quote from the Pope commentary because he pretty much grasped what happened. Let me just start here. One effect of the persecution was the breaking down of opposing barriers of habit, opinion, and prejudice.

If the rulers and priests had accepted the gospel, it might have been very difficult to separate it from circumcision and from the temple and from exclusive Judaism. It might have been a long time before Jewish Christians would have turned in a spirit of love and brotherhood to their Samaritan neighbors or planted a community of Christians in the great heathen city of Antioch. Endless scruples, hesitations, and difficulties would have barred the way.

The persecution quickened with a marvelous impulse, their benevolence and faith. By the force of circumstances, the persecuted disciples expelled from country and home by their own flesh and blood, found themselves drawn into the closest bonds with those who were not Jews, and felt compelled to tell them of the love of Jesus, and then to feel that that love made them both one. It would have taken generations perhaps to do what persecution did in a day.

Nor must we overlook the influence of persecutions when endured in the true martyr spirit in deepening and heightening the faith, the zeal, and the love of the disciple. The fire of the spiritual life and the soul of the saint burns brightest in the darkest hours of earthly tribulation. The love of Christ, the hope of glory, the preciousness of the gospel are never perhaps felt in their living power so fully as when the lights and fires of earthly joy and comforts are extinguished.

Then, in the presence, so to speak, of Christ's unveiled power and glory, charity and boldness, zeal, and self-sacrifice are at their highest pitch, and the making known to others the glad tidings of great joy seems to be the only thing worth living for, so that the fruit of persecution is to be seen in a noble army of martyrs and confessors, qualified to the very highest extent, and eager in the very highest degree to preach far and wide the unsearchable riches of Christ. You know, we haven't experienced persecution like that, although there's every possibility we will before it's over with. But I tell you, especially you counselors, I want to just stop for one second and say that you do face persecution in a small measure here at Pure Life, because when you are counseling these men in sexual sin and confronting them about the underlying motives and attitudes in their hearts that are bringing about this lifestyle of sin, I know, because of my own years of experience in this, I know that you are facing the fury of someone's flesh, and it's very difficult to face that in the right spirit.

It's hard. But it's also, God is using it for good in your soul. It's doing more for you internally than you realize.

It's not just a matter of enduring and getting through, and, you know, of course you feel like a failure all the time probably, but I'm telling you, the Lord is using it for good inside you. So we see this persecution, and it's causing Christians to spread out all over the Roman Empire, and so even before he came to the Lord, we find Saul having a major, or playing a major role in the expansion of the gospel. The guy just had a way, you know, he just had a knack for it.

All right, now let's get into this story about Philip and Samaria, and that's really what I want to focus my attention on here this morning. I'm going to read this whole story, but let me just say a couple of things before I get started. Luke provides a couple of anecdotes out of Philip's life here in chapter 8, and it's really all part of what was happening as God was expanding the reach of the church.

You know, remember when it started, it was just this handful of Hebrew Christians, and little by little, the Lord is trying to get the disciples, and the other 120, trying to get them to open their minds up. Their entire lives, they had been absolutely, I want to say, well, indoctrinated with Jewish exclusivism, however you say that, and that's all they had ever known. They were just brainwashed in this mentality, and now they had to start opening their eyes and seeing beyond the Jewish world, but that was not going to be something that would come about easily.

This expansion out of the Judaism of Jerusalem was going to really require the Lord to help them take baby steps to get out of that. So we see in these two anecdotes, things starting to open up just a little bit. You know, and as is so typical of the Lord, he moves in a great calm.

He's, you know, wise and methodical and patient in the way he does things, unlike us a lot of the time. So, you know, we see a couple of the first moves here. First, he starts by expanding into Samaria.

Who are the Samaritans? They're half-breed Jews, but they're circumcised. So, you know, a Samaritan, as much as the Jews despise them, you know, they could, I guess, legally sit down and eat food with them, because they're circumcised. And then we see him dealing with this Ethiopian eunuch, who was a proselyte to Judaism.

So he probably was circumcised also, but he's a Gentile, he's not even a half-breed. So the, you know, the envelopes pushed out a little bit further. And then later, we're going to see Peter minister to the centurion in Caesarea, and it's pushed out a little bit further.

And he's also some kind of a friend to Judaism, probably not a proselyte, probably uncircumcised. And then finally, you see Paul just break down all the barriers between Judaism and Christianity, and he goes right out to the Gentile world. But that did not happen easily, you know.

And it's hard for us in our 21st century mindset of all we've known as Christianity to understand how overwhelming of a challenge this was to the Christians in Jerusalem. Let me read something the biblical expositor said. The conversion of the Samaritans must be viewed as one of the divinely appointed steps in the plan of human unification.

One of the divinely appointed actions gently leading to the final overthrow of the wall of partition between Jew and Gentile, which the earlier chapters of this book trace for us. How beautiful the order, how steady and regular the progress that is set before us. God does his work in grace, as in nature, by degrees.

He teaches us that changes must come, and that each age of the church must be marked by development and improvement. But he shows us here in his word how changes should be made, not rashly, unwisely, impetuously, and therefore uncharitably, but gently, gradually. Yeah, and that's what we're seeing as the Lord unfolds this story here.

Now, before we actually get into the story, I just want to remind you of something that had happened a few years before this. You remember the story in John 4 where Jesus had gone through Samaria. He said, I must, I got the King James in my mind, I must needs go through Samaria.

And so he was compelled by the Holy Spirit to go through Samaria, and he ends up sitting at this well. The disciples had gone into town, and he's sitting there talking to this woman who's obviously very loose, promiscuous, and so on. He leads her to the Lord.

And she gets so impacted that she goes into town and just broadcasts it everywhere, just crosses every social barrier in her enthusiasm for God, and the things of God, and that this Messiah is right out there at the well. And there was a revival that broke out that day in Samaria. So this is the same area.

Was it the exact same town? I don't know. I think so, but I'm not sure about that. But anyway, if you remember, you know, the dull-hearted disciples are, they're so out of it, they don't know what's happening half the time in those early days.

And so Jesus is patiently trying to explain to them, and he says, Listen, the harvest is white. You know, it's ready to be reaped and pulled in for God's kingdom. And we hear, John tells us, from that city many of the Samaritans believed in him.

All right, so that is a backdrop to this story. You know, it's almost like in wartime, how they have a phrase where they say they soften the enemy through artillery. They would just pound an enemy's position for a few hours of artillery, and then they'd send the troops in.

And that's kind of how it is spiritually as well a lot of the times. The Lord will, you know, he has certain people whose job it is to sow the seed, to break through the concrete, you know, to plow the hard ground. And then someone else comes in later and pulls in the harvest.

And actually that was right in that same passage where Jesus was talking about that. So that's what we see here, that Jesus plowed the ground, and now Philip's going to come in and reap the harvest. Let's read here.

Verse 4, Therefore those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing.

For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice, and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. So there was much rejoicing in that city. Now there was a man named Simon who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria claiming to be someone great.

Yeah, at least he was out there with it. But anyway, and they all from smallest to greatest were giving attention to him saying this man is what is called the great power of God. He probably named himself that, you know, and came in with all that audacious attitude and so on.

And they were giving him attention because he had a long time astonished them with his magic arts. And Matthew Henry suggested that he thinks or thought, maybe he still thinks it up there, I don't know, but his thought was that Satan had purposely sent this deceiver right to that group of people where Jesus had plowed the ground and had done the work beforehand, sent them in there to try to corrupt the faith that Jesus had written in their hearts, really. And it's very well possible that that's true.

It wouldn't surprise me a bit. Verse 12, But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike. Even Simon himself believed.

And after being baptized, he continued on with Philip. And as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed. Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit.

You know, and someone mentioned this. I just need to mention it, too, that it was only a few years before this that Jesus and the band of disciples had gone through this Samaria on a different occasion than John for. And some town that they went to didn't receive them.

And James and John, these two sons of thunder, said to the Lord, Should we call down fire from heaven and burn them up? I mean, you see how? And Jesus said to them, if I remember right, He said, You don't know what spirit you're of. And so here they are, or at least John, anyway, back to the same area, but in a different spirit now. He's been humbled a little bit.

Verse 16, For he had not yet fallen upon any of them. They had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.

Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone 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 no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.

Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity. But Simon answered and said, Pray to the Lord for me yourself, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.

All right, now let me just stop there. I wanted to read that whole story to get it out there, what we're dealing with here. I want to make a few observations about Simon Magus, what the early church fathers called him.

First of all, we see here, which is so typical, any time there's a move of God, any time that the Lord begins working amongst people, that the enemy is right there to sow tares in with the wheat. He's always, you can count on him bringing counterfeits in to the group. The damage that he does to the church through counterfeit Christians is just heartbreaking.

Another thing here is, this is really what I want to focus on though, that Luke says that Simon believed, and that's the same Greek term, piteo, that is used to describe the new faith of the Samaritans. Where

was that verse? Well, it's in there somewhere, we just read it. And also, when the 3,000 were saved, that they believed on the Lord, and many other occasions that word is used.

But the New Testament doesn't differentiate between salvations, or that's not the right way to say it. Apparently, there's a wide range, a lot of latitude in that word, pisteo. Because people believed, but belief in the Lord, you can have a mental ascent that is belief, or you can go all the way to heartfelt, putting your trust, really, not just cheap words, but really putting your trust in Christ.

And going through with a complete conversion. And a lot of the different people who believed, quote, unquote, in the New Testament, it seems as though they actually didn't believe, they didn't get converted. In John chapter 8, for instance, there was Jews there who believed, same word, but then they argued with Jesus, and it became obvious that they didn't surrender to the Lord, they didn't submit to Him, they didn't really believe from their hearts, and they certainly didn't trust Him, and so on.

And of course, it's also the same term that's used in James 1, that the devils believe and shudder. So there's something more to that term. All right, so Simon believed, but what did he believe? Let me just blow through a few things here quickly.

He believed the stories about Jesus performing miracles, but his belief went through the lens of his own satanic experiences. So he's hearing about the miracles Jesus performed. He's seeing what's happening through Philip.

But in his mind, through his corrupted perspective, what he is seeing is hardly any different, or no different, than what he's already experienced to some degree through the agency of Satan's power. You know, wow, that's just frightening, especially in the day and age we live in. And some of the things going on, I don't want to overstate this, but I do need to say it.

Some of the things going on in the charismatic church, I believe, is the agency of Satan. I do believe that, but not all of it. And so it takes a lot of discernment, because the power of God is moving on this earth today.

The Lord is working through people, and He is doing miracles and healings, and He does do that. But, man, it takes discernment. I won't mention the guy's name, but there was a guy a few years ago down in Florida having these big meetings, and there was all this, I don't know what was going on.

I didn't go there. But there was power there. And I knew, I watched a video, because one of my friends told me about this guy.

He was all excited about it. But I knew, just the things I had heard, I already knew, this is not the Lord. And I watched two or three minutes of this, and I just said, that man is demon-possessed.

And, you know, I only said that privately. I'm not going to say that publicly, but that's the way it seemed to me, because I did not get the sense of the Lord in that. But anyway, we're moving into a time when signs and wonders are going to deceive many people, and we have to have discernment.

Discernment of what spirit people are in, it's so important. And I'm going to get to that here in just a minute more. So Simon believed in the miracles of Philip and Peter, but he believed they were in it for themselves like he was.

You know, again, looking through his own self-centered perspective and lens, all the good that he's seeing these men do, he is, in his mind, seeing them in the same spirit that he's in, which is all for self. He believed in the gospel message, but there's no brokenness over sin, no confession of unworthiness, no repentance, no desire to be transformed from within. He's not looking for any change in his life.

He believed he could become a disciple of Christ, but this wasn't enough. He wanted to shoot right to the top and be on equal footing with the disciples. And there again, that kind of attitude is prominent in the church today.

People fighting for a position and unwilling to pay the price to allow God to raise them up in His own way and through the process of discipline and all the different things that God does to work His character into them. You know, they're unwilling to go through that process. They just want the acclaim and the honor of the position.

He believed that God could do miracles through him, but his motivation was to gain further fame and money for himself. He believed that he could receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, but he didn't desire this infilling for himself. You know, he doesn't ask, I want to be baptized in the Holy Spirit.

He doesn't even ask for that. All he wants is the power so that when he lays hands on other people, they become impacted like these Samaritans who clearly were probably speaking in tongues, probably, you know, some powerful experience that was demonstrative. You know, that's what he wanted was that kind of power, to go out and lay hands on people and have them be affected like that.

And finally, when Peter confronted him, he believed Peter's prayers could absolve him of guilt, but he wasn't willing to pray for forgiveness for himself because it wasn't in his heart. He had no perceived need for forgiveness or for change. He doesn't want to change.

Yeah, he doesn't want to face judgment, and this God who Peter represents is obviously a powerful God, and he doesn't want to come up against that and get him angry. Remember, this is in a culture that's just laden with polytheistic beliefs, you know, in the Greek culture. So you see how out of whack Simon was in this whole experience, and there's no way anyone's going to convince me that he was converted to Jesus Christ that day.

Justin Martyr, who was a Samaritan himself and lived in the following century, he said that the Samaritans revered Simon, quote, as the highest God, you know, before Philip came in, and that after Peter reproved him, he made it his mission in life to do everything he could to refute Christianity and to oppose it, especially anything that Peter was doing. In fact, he said that he followed Peter later to Rome, apparently, and he was so successful and had such an impact upon the people there and somewhat, apparently, the Christian church that it led many people away from the Lord, and they actually established some kind of a statue to him there, and they dug it up later. A few centuries ago, they dug it up, and it had the very inscription on it that Justin had described.

Arrhenius, who was also a contemporary of Justin, said that he was the father of Gnosticism and identifies the sect of the Simonians as being derived from him. Now, I don't know if that's true, that he was the father of Gnosticism. He may have been one more false teacher that contributed to that movement.

It seems to me it was bigger than one man. That's my, you know, what I tend to think, but anyway, that's what Arrhenius said, and he lived a lot closer to what happened than I do. And then there's also the

second century Acts of Peter, which is one of those pseudo-gospel things, and there's not a lot of credence.

You can't put a lot of credence in what it says, but it did talk about the Simon Magus and his magical acts and the things that he did and how Peter, you know, bested him and so on. I wouldn't put too much stock in it. But anyway, you know, what Luke says here about the Samaritans' veneration of Simon seems to support, you know, all of this.

Now, let me just read a couple more quotes here, and we'll get on to this story about the Ethiopian eunuch. The Pope of Commentary, again, the career of Simon seems to leave this lesson, that contact with holy things, if it does not convert, hardens the heart. Man, that is so true, and that's what happens in this place week after week after week.

In fact, we had that powerful move of God here, what was it, two weeks ago? And then look at the aftermath. You know, many of these men were really affected that day. And then we had people just totally giving over to sin and having to be kicked out of here.

Why? Because when you encounter the power and the presence of God, it's going to either push you in one direction or the other. And that's what happened with Simon. Anyway, it either converts or hardens the heart, that the light of Christ, if it does not purify the soul, plunges it into deeper darkness.

And we saw that young man who was asked to leave a week and a half ago or whenever it was, a week ago. That's exactly what happened. You know, you could just see the Lord reaching out to him.

He's been here three or four weeks, maybe a month, and then this powerful meeting we had here. I mean, that was the time for him to throw himself on his face before God and to plead for forgiveness, to really repent to the bone, to really submit and surrender. But what did he do? He went the other way.

That was his response. And now I just shudder to think of what's happening with him. All right, another pulpit commentator said this.

Even in those days when the profession of the faith of Christ subjected men to persecution, we find men joining the church's ranks only to pollute them and then to separate themselves and to begin some accursed heresy. Either the motive was vile from the first or the restraints imposed by Christianity were found too severe for the half-converted heart. Man, I love that phrase because I see that in the church of America.

The half-converted heart. I don't know what that means exactly. You know, only God knows what goes on in a human heart.

But anyway, and the heresy was framed to reconcile the claims of the gospel with those of the passions which refused to be subdued. And that is exactly the truth. Every heresy is that.

It's a mixture of truth and falsehood from Satan. And of course, you know, mingled truth is falsehood. It's in fact more dangerous falsehood because it's got truth mixed in there.

And that's what all these heresies are that you see that have proliferated throughout the history of the church is Satan finding a way to get people into the church who would bring and establish false teachings that cater to people's flesh. And people are happy to have it so. All right, finally, the biblical expositor.

Philip came across the first of those subtle opponents with whom the gospel has ever had to struggle. Men who did not directly oppose the truth, but who corrupted its pure morality. The evil which he did and taught lived long afterwards.

His followers continued his teaching, seducing many proselytes by the apparent depth and subtlety of their views. So, you know, that was the heritage of Simon's life is that he left a legacy of falsehood and corruption in the church behind him. All right, now this story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, I'm not going to read it.

Let me just summarize it. You all know the story. But let me just paint it from a different slant a little bit.

Probably, you know, the enthusiasm, the excitement kind of died down over a matter of weeks or something. And so, you know, apparently the Lord felt like it was okay to send Philip forth. So he sends an angel, and an angel speaks to Philip.

Now, I didn't say that the angel appeared. And I can tell you there was two different occasions when I think it was an angel that spoke to me. On two definite occasions I heard a voice.

And it definitely was not the devil. But, so I understand what that feels like. And he said to go down to this particular road that's like 40 or 50 miles south of where they're at.

And he doesn't tell him why he's going. He doesn't tell him what to do, who to look for. He doesn't say anything.

Just go to that road. Now, just imagine, I'm trying to think of a road. Let's say the AA Highway over by the Ohio River out in the country out there.

Let's say that you hear a voice that says, I want you to go over to the AA Highway. Now, if you really are walking with the Lord, you know if you're hearing from the Lord or in one of his messengers, or if you're hearing something crazy, I'm assuming you would be able to discern the difference. But just imagine what that must have been like for Philip to make that long walk.

It probably took him several days, I guess, to walk 40 or 50 miles. I don't know. But what's he thinking that whole time? I'm sure he's really praying, Lord, I don't know what you have for me.

I don't know why you're sending me down to a desert road by Gaza. That's Philistine country, Lord. Why are you sending me there? Man, look at all the work that I've got going here.

We've got something really wonderful happening here. Why are you sending me away? He gets down there, and he hears this Ethiopian eunuch, this official, sitting in his chariot reading scripture, and he notices it. And then I think, if I remember right, the Spirit told him to speak to him.

So he gets up and gets in a conversation with him and explains the gospel and leads the man to the Lord. And what that basically tells me is that the Lord is willing to leave the 99 to go after the 1. That's how much value God places in every soul. And I don't know how he used Philip after that or whatever other than we know he's an evangelist, and he picked him up and whisked him away.

What would happen if he did something like that in today's church? You know, with all the unbelief that blankets the American church, I don't think people could handle it. And they wouldn't believe you if it happened to you and you tried telling them that. All right, now, I want to share a few thoughts about this

guy, Simon Magus, and I want to bring it home a little bit for ourselves.

Look at this phrase in verse 21. Peter has just ran into this guy, just had an encounter with him. The guy asks one little question, you know, and look at Peter's response.

And I'm not going to get back into the whole story, but this one thing that he said here, your heart is not right before God. And I can think of times where we've had guys say to us, you know, in our counseling, you don't know what's going on inside me. How many of you counselors have ever heard that? You know, it's like, dude, you don't know what you're talking about.

It is written all over you. You know, God gives you discernment. If you are a counselor and this is how God is using you, he has given you discernment.

I don't know if it's the gift of discernment or just discernment that comes from the way he's using you, but you can see the spirit these men are in a lot of the time. Maybe not everything. You may not know every jot and tittle about what's going on in their hearts and so on, but you feel it, you smell it.

And I've said that to guys in the past, years ago, when I used to deal with those guys one-on-one, I would say to them, I don't know exactly what's going on inside, but I smell it, and I can see it, and I know something's there. And I did, I knew it, I could discern it, I could feel it. And Peter, now keep in mind what happened with Ananias and Sapphira.

Imagine that. Ananias walks in, all he's trying to do is give him some money, and Peter says, why are you trying to lie to the Holy Spirit? And struck him dead, you know. And also, Philip.

Peter discerns Philip, his heart. And he was certainly part of the decision-making to choose to make Philip one of the deacons. So he knows Philip's heart, and he knows this man's heart, just through discernment.

But what I want to talk more about here is our hearts, and the way God deals with us. And hear me, dear ones, hear me. Because I hope that this will be an encouragement to you.

And I want to put it to you this way. First of all, God sees what goes on in our hearts. In everyone's hearts, obviously.

But right now I'm talking to you. Sincere believers sitting here. You dear people who are giving your lives for the Lord and for His cause.

God sees exactly what's going on in your heart. And I'm saying that in a positive way. He is the one who searches the minds and the hearts.

He searches. Like someone who's looking for something. But God looks at you with eyes of love.

So He sees what goes on inside you. How much you are truly seeking Him. He sees your battle with temptation.

He sees the momentum of your life. Really what's going on inside you. He sees that.

He sees what motivates you. He sees how you pray for people and believe Him in what He says. And as I've said before, Christianity begins and ends in the heart.

And as I have said in one of my books, that the heart is like a seedbed. And out of that seedbed comes our thoughts. And our thoughts lead to actions.

And actions lead to habit patterns. And habit patterns become a lifestyle which determine the destiny. So everything that goes on in the heart is so important.

And that's why Satan is always trying to influence it. And cloud it. And deceive it.

And so on. And why we have to shield our hearts from the devil's influences. But what I'm getting at right now though is that God sees... How do you say it? The machinations of the heart.

What's going on there. He sees. Now, I want to say it from this perspective.

Let's say a guy is working for a boss. And he knows instinctively that the boss doesn't know everything going on inside him. And so he's constantly trying to put himself forward in the most favorable light.

He's trying to act just right and sound just right when he's around the boss. Because he knows that the boss doesn't really know. And I'm talking about someone who's sincere.

I'm not talking about a fraud. I'm talking about a guy who's really trying to do a good job and so on. But he's trying to show the boss what's really going on inside of his heart.

But we don't have to worry about any of that with the Lord. It's such a blessing that he knows. I don't know if I'm... I'm not getting it across.

When you're dealing with people, they can easily size you up wrongly. They can misjudge you. You could say one thing off and not even be aware that you said it.

I'm a great one for that. And, you know, the person gets something in their mind about you and sizes you up and judges you and decides that you are such and such a type of person and so on. But with the Lord, not any concern about that.

He sees us exactly the way it is. I told him so many times when I've talked with him about this that I'm so grateful he sees me for who I really am. You know, so he sees.

God sees and God judges. Now, when I'm talking about judgment for you, I'm not talking about like great white throne judgment. I'm talking about he judges your motives.

He's weighing them. He's looking at, you know, why you do the things you do and all of that. And he knows exactly what's going on.

And he can make just decisions. Every decision the Lord makes about your life is perfect. He knows exactly when to bless you and how much to bless you or if you need discipline.

And he knows how to temper the discipline. He doesn't want to discipline any of his children. You know, I mean, if it was just up to him, he would just bless, bless, bless because that's God's heart.

That is God's heart. But because he loves us, he knows that he has to discipline us because we're so crazy inside. We're so full of pride.

It just doesn't take anything. He blesses us a little bit and we just, you know, go off the deep end thinking we are the great power of God. So God sees perfectly, he judges perfectly, and he gives perfectly.

God is a giver. He is such a giver. And I had a list.

I didn't want to take the time to go through it here, but I have a list of all that God gives us. So much he gives us. But I thought of this one little thing that Jesus said.

Peter said to Jesus, we've left home and everything to follow you. And Jesus said, you know, anyone who is following me, he says that the Lord, you know, for his sake, he says that the Lord, that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age and in eternal life also. And, of course, a little persecution in there.

But my testimony to you is that God is faithful to give you, to give you his gifts. Nothing gets missed by the Lord. Everything that's going on inside of you.

And listen, he does judge our wrongful attitudes and so on. You know, I don't mean to make light of that, but I'm talking to sincere, remnant, true believers here today. And when God looks at you, it's not to size you up to find out what's wrong with you.

He's looking at you to find out what's right with you, to find out what he can bless, how much he can give to you. You know, outward things, but mostly inward things. That's where the real joy and the peace and the love and all of the things that he does inside of us.

That's the important part of it. 1 Corinthians 15, 58. This is in a couple of translations.

The Phillips says, Busy yourselves in the Lord's work. Be sure that nothing you do for him is ever lost or ever wasted. Man, that's so encouraging.

Every little thing, whether it's a little prayer, a smile to some old lady, whatever it is. Everything, God captures it, puts it in the memory banks of heaven. None of it's missed.

In the New English Bible, Work without limit, since you know that in the Lord your labor cannot be lost. That's true. Nothing you do for the Lord is lost.

Again, I'm trying to bring it back to what's going on inside your heart. What really affected me when I read this story about this guy, Simon Magus, and just the things going on in his heart. I don't know why it affected me this way, but the way it affected me, and I'm doing this knowing I'm stepping on very tenuous ground now.

It seems as though I'm going to say something with self-serving purposes, and trust me, that is not it. I want to share with you just a tiny taste. Not that my boast is in myself.

My boast is in the Lord. What a great-hearted, giving God we have. With all my failures, all my faults, and all the stuff that I am so aware of, that I live inside of, that is the reality of my daily life.

Not that I've done anything right or good, but all the ways that I failed the Lord. That's what I live in. But God sees things differently, praise the Lord, than I do.

When I went through this the other day, I was sitting and I was thinking, just thanking the Lord, how much he's done for me. I remember being so lost, so lost in such darkness. God reaching down and capturing my heart.

And all he has done for me over these last 30 or 40 years since then, even when I was in all my rebellion and turned away from him and threw myself into darkness, he still loved me and covered me. What do you do with a God like that? That's just that. Then I look over the long history of all the rich spiritual experiences he's lavished me with.

Unbelievable the things that God has shown Kathy and me, and taken us into his presence at times in such powerful ways. And my marriage to my wife, how God put the two of us together. The perfect woman for me.

And being in the battle, being a veteran of the spiritual wars of the final days of the church. What a blessing that is to me, to be a veteran in that war. And all the different ways the Lord's allowed me to minister.

Television, radio, churches all over. Our home that the Lord blessed us with. And it was him.

He spoke to us and sent us right to that place on that little country road. And that's a whole other thing. God's blessings.

Now, these are mostly outward blessings. And I want to just read this little blurb that I wrote in an article recently. And I'm going to wrap it up here.

But this is completely outward. But I'm going to read this because my hope is that it will convey God's giving heart to his people and his desire to give. The Lord knows my heart.

You know, delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. That's my testimony. This is just one thing.

Just one and not the biggest thing. But it's something that's outward and demonstrative that I can show you how God gives. And again, I'm just pulling this out of an article, out of the context of it.

And I wrote it for the same basic reason in this article. But let me blow through this real quick. I have spent ten weeks in Israel.

This has to do with travel. And the Lord knows that, you know, if there's something outward he could do to bless me, it would be that, to let me travel. Because I'm just one of those people that enjoys going to different parts of the world.

I have spent ten weeks in Israel, toured Auschwitz and Dachau concentration camps, and visited the ruins of New Testament cities throughout Greece and Turkey. I have trekked in the Peruvian Andes, slogged through a Bolivian rainforest, swum in the Pacific Ocean in Central America, and caught a marlin off the coast of Mexico. I have slept in a Bedouin tent in the Negev, hiked in David's old haunts in the Judean wilderness, and explored the caves of Cappadocia.

I have strolled through Amsterdam, climbed the Acropolis of Athens, seen the sights of London, visited Dracula's castle in Transylvania, experienced the Colosseum and Catacombs of Rome, dined in Munich, and spent New Year's Eve in Zurich. I have ministered in Bahrain, Belgium, Bolivia, Canada, Colombia,

Czech Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Holland, Jordan, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, Poland, Romania, and Uruguay. I have preached in a host of prisons, including San Quentin, Soledad, and Huntsville.

And this phrase is what I want to leave you with. This is God's heart, what He said when He was rebuking David, and He listed out the things He had done for David. And I keep this in the forefront of my mind.

If that had been too little, I would have added to you many more things like these. Dear ones, what goes on in your hearts? You're striving to know the Lord, to do the right thing, to be a blessing to other people. In the midst of all the... You feel like failure in all the difficulties.

Bradley, I hope you're listening to me. Because you need encouragement. All the battles that we go through for souls, none of it, none of what you're doing is missed by the Lord.

Every single thought, every little prayer, He notices. And He will abundantly bless you. It doesn't happen right away.

God knows how to time things. He knows when we can handle it. But it is in His heart to bless His people.

It's in His heart. He's got a great heart. God is a giver.

He gave His Son for us. And He just keeps giving and giving and giving. And we will experience it in all its abundance when we cross that line one day.

Hallelujah. Lord, I thank You. I know it's true.

Everything I'm saying is true. It's my testimony. That You see what goes on inside of us, Lord.

And that You reward us accordingly. Here on earth and later in heaven. I don't understand it, Lord.

We deserve nothing. Especially if we sized up all our many failures. And lack of gratitude and so on.

And weighed that against the things we've done right. Man, do we lack. Yet, Lord, it's like You are just blind to our faults.

As long as our heart is right. As long as it's in our heart to pursue You. And to follow after You.

And to seek You. As long as that is the momentum of our hearts. You cannot do enough for us.

It's just the way You are, Lord. You see. You judge.

And You give. And it's all with a great heart of love. And I will love You forever for it, Lord.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

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