**One Missing Piece (Acts 8)**

Have you ever had one of those experiences when you worked for a bunch of hours on a jigsaw puzzle only to discover that one piece is missing? I worked on one for about four hours and was feeling pretty good because the box said it would take 6-8 years. I was almost finished when I discovered it was missing just one piece. Frustrating.

Maybe you’re not into jigsaw puzzles but perhaps you had a similar experience with that cute IKEA bunk bed set. You followed the directions righteously but they forgot to include one bracket that’s crucial for holding it all together.

I’ve been learning small engine repair from Dick Brown. He’s taught me enough that I very carefully dismantled and “re-mantled” a carburetor all by myself. Unfortunately I had omitted one piece which I found among my tools on the bench. Once I put that little piece in place everything went together and the engine worked.

There’s a lesson in this that I think can help us as we seek to be the people God wants us to be.

Our Bible study a few weeks ago looked at the first chapter of 2 Peter. Peter wrote that God has given us everything we need to live godly lives. In fact he added that we can escape the corruption of this world and share God-like nature. This true for every believer.

We all suffer from human nature, the flesh as Paul called it, that part of our personhood that was ruined by the original sin.

The New Testament is clear that we have to struggle with corrupt human nature as we try to live a Christian life. It is equally clear in 2 Peter that God has provided whatever we need to overcome the sin nature and enjoy a godly nature. We can live like Jesus.

That sounds great but who here is going to claim that you’re living a pure Christ-like life with goodness and knowledge, and self-control, and perseverance, and godliness, and brotherly kindness, and love (the things Peter identified)?

Was Peter wrong? Was he mistaken when he wrote that *God has* *given us everything we need for life and godliness*? (2 Peter 1:3) Did God not really give us that blessing? Or if He did give that to us and we still fail, are we excused because we’re only human?

Something’s missing. Maybe it’s just one small piece of the puzzle of human life. We were created in the image of God. That image was corrupted by sin. Through Christ God has reinstated our privilege. So what’s wrong? Why aren’t we showing it?

I think we can find an answer in an episode recorded in Acts 8. We’ll need some background in order to understand it.

Two points: The first, has to do with the persecution that followed the stoning of Stephen that Ben talked about two weeks ago. Ben ended with 8:1, *Saul was there* (at the murder of Stephen) *giving approval to his death*.

Saul was a zealous defender of Judaism who set out to destroy the church. The word destroy, λυμαινω, describes a body being torn apart by a wild animal. You’ve all seen an animal that was splattered on the highway, but have you ever seen a video of a pack of hyenas on a wildebeest? That’s λυμαινω! That’s what Saul wanted to do to the church. He wanted to shred the church into unrecognizable pieces.

To that end he dragged people, men and women off to prison, and when he did they seldom returned. If someone from your family got arrested by Paul, it almost always ended badly for them in slow torturous death. Saul saw Christians not as misguided pilgrims sincerely embracing error. He saw them as deliberate imposters who were menacing the ancestral traditions of the faith.

On that day that they killed Stephen, persecution broke out against Christian and…*all except the Apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria*. Acts 8:1

Herein lies the second point of background. The persecuted Christians from the church in Jerusalem…*announced the good news wherever they went*…(Acts 8:4) in this case Samaria, resulting Samaritans becoming believers in Jesus. Samaritans, the hated half-Jews who believed that a Joshua built sanctuary at Mt. Gerizim was the center of Hebrew worship.

There is an apocryphal book written by a man who claimed to be the personal secretary or amanuensis of the prophet Jeremiah. The book called The Apocalypse of Baruch proclaimed, *I will scatter this people among the Gentiles, that they may do good to the Gentiles*. 2 Baruch, 1:4

And so it happened. The Christians were scattered away from Jerusalem and among the Gentiles. There they did good, preaching the Gospel and people of Samaria became Christians. So much for destroying the church.

One of those scattered Christians was Philip. You remember Philip from chapter six, one of the seven men *full of the Holy Spirit*, chosen to be the first Deacons in the church at Jerusalem.

We’re told in verse 5 that Philip preached in Samaria. His message included three things:

1.      He preached Christ.

My first thought is, *Duh! What else would he preach?* That matters because just like today, a lot of people preached religion. Have you ever heard someone refer to another person as religious? Being religious doesn’t mean anything. Muslims are religious. Hindus are religious. Even atheists are religious.

Philip didn’t preach religion. He preached Jesus Christ. He didn’t preach about Christ, he preached the person of Christ. He introduced Jesus as a friend to all who would believe. He preached about how Jesus changes lives; how He meets our basic needs. He preached about what Jesus taught about life and sin and forgiveness, and, salvation.

2.    He didn’t preach Christ in a vacuum. The framework of Philip’s preaching was the Kingdom of God, the reign and rule of God; His Lordship over our lives; His purposes. It’s one thing to believe and accept Christ as Savior but that won’t last long if you doesn’t allow Him to be Lord of every facet of life.

Jesus had preached, *Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand* (Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15). He didn’t separate believing from repenting. Neither did Philip. He called people to join the Kingdom of God through personal relationship with Jesus.

3.    Philip also knew that he couldn’t just introduce people to Jesus without sharing the power to live a victorious life thus the third thing included in his preaching was the power of Jesus’ name.

Being from the Jerusalem church he realized that once a person believes and accepts the Good News about Jesus, he has exchanged one set of problems for another. Remember, his home church was pressured by the religious authorities;

         they had a leading couple die in the worship service;

         they experienced a conflict between widows who depended on the church for food;

         and one of Philip’s fellow Deacons was murdered by a mob.

Philip knew it wasn't a safe place or personal getaway that they needed. They needed the power of the name of Jesus Christ. Trouble from outside wasn’t their greatest problem. Their greatest problem was that they all had “an old way of life, an old way of thinking, an old set of values” that they had to overcome.

In our worship we sing about the name of Jesus. It’s the name of Jesus that unlocks the power of God in our lives. *When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said.* Acts 8:6 We can rightly assume that the miraculous signs Philip did he did in the name of Jesus.

Now we’re getting to the lesson I want us to consider today, but first let me introduce Simon of Samaria. Simon was a crafty man who greatly impressed people by using magic arts. Μαγευω translated magic arts is undefined in the New Testament.

A non-Biblical document, the Didache, in explaining the Ten Commandments includes, *You must never practice magic arts, you must never practice sorcery*. Whatever they are exactly, the magic arts included some sort of trickery and apparently Simon was very good at it.

When Philip did miraculous things as he preached the Good news and the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus many believed and were baptized including Simon. The Apostles in Jerusalem heard about this and sent a delegation, Peter and John to Samaria, presumably to celebrate with and encourage them.

They quickly discovered that something was missing. These people had honestly and faithfully accepted Christ as Lord and Savior, joining the Kingdom of God, but they hadn’t received the Holy Spirit.

We’re not told why Philip hadn’t preached about the Holy Spirit but this one piece of the Gospel was left out. Peter and John recognized that this was like that missing piece of the puzzle, or of your IKEA desk. They could not live the Christian life without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Remember in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit fell upon the believers and they were emboldened to preach the Gospel in the streets? When people believed and asked what they must do Peter said, *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.* Acts 2:38

We get the Holy Spirit when we believe the Gospel and are baptized into Jesus. But when the Holy Spirit is left out of preaching we leave people, though born again, without the power necessary to live the Christian life. Without the Holy Spirit they must live by their own power. We know that’s not enough to beat the flesh nature.

I have been somewhat negligent in this myself. In reaction to the craziness that some have attached to the presence of the Holy Spirit, I have been reluctant to teach this part of the Gospel.

The Bible never says that the presence of the Holy Spirit in one’s life must be expressed in a particular way, such as speaking in tongues, but that’s what a lot of people immediately think and it tends to get weird.

What the Bible does say is that the presence of the Holy Spirit produces fruit, *love-joy-peace-patience-kindness-goodness-gentleness-faithfulness and self-control*, and He endows us with gifts to serve the mission of God.

Here’s where we connect the dots. Something was missing in Samaria. Some critical piece of the Gospel was missing among these new Christians. Although Simon believed and was baptized we see that the Holy Spirit was missing in his life.

Picking up in verse 15, Peter and John…*prayed for them* (the new believers in Samaria) *that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.*

*When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money and said, “Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.* Acts 8:15-19

I don’t think Simon was prepared for Peter’s response. (Maybe that led him to dislike Peter. According to a non-Biblical account entitled *Recognitions and Homilies*, Simon become a constant adversary of Peter.) Whatever the long-term result, thinking that the gift of the Holy Spirit could be bought demonstrates misunderstanding of the Holy Spirit.

Verse 20: *Peter answered: “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps He will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.”* Acts 8:20-23

Obviously there was more going on than simply misunderstanding the Holy Spirit for Simon, instead of being filled with the Holy Spirit, was filled with bitterness and sin. Misunderstanding the Holy Spirit is not an uncommon problem today.

         Some believers try to live the Christian life without the power of the Holy Spirit.

         Some want the reward of Christ without surrendering their wills to Him.

         Some want to add Christ as another trophy of religion but not as Lord of their lives.

         Some want the power of the Holy Spirit to enable their own purpose and direction.

Lloyd John Ogilvie wrote, *It is possible to have belief in Jesus as Lord and Savior and not be filled with the Holy Spirit, it is also possible to want His Spirit’s power for our own self-controlled lives without repentance and total commitment to the Lord*.

Some people don’t want to change their lives when they become Christian. They want God to approve of their sin. They want Jesus their way not His way. They don’t want to repent of their sinfulness. They want rather to continue as they are but with the blessing of Christ.

The critical piece missing from the lives of many believers is - **the Holy Spirit**. I’ll accept some responsibility for that. I haven’t preached and taught about the Holy Spirit very much. As I’m studying the Book of Acts for this series I’m struck by how it was the Holy Spirit in the early Christians that was responsible for their effectiveness.

In the words of A. W. Tozer, a great preacher and author who preached in about 6 different congregations in his career including one in Indianapolis,

*If the Holy Spirit had been withdrawn from the New Testament church, 95% of what they did would stop, and everybody would know the difference*. *In contrast,* he wrote, *if the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the church today, 95% of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference*.

What an indictment! How do we plead? Guilty or not guilty? I say, *Guilty!* Not because we don’t want to involve the Holy Spirit in our lives, but because we don’t think about Him much.

Whatever the reason, it explains why we’re not nearly as effective in taking the Gospel to the world as was the early church, who did it without the aid of electronic media and the internet.

We need the Holy Spirit to be able to live the Christian life, to…*not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But* (to) *delight in the law of the Lord.* Psalm 1:1f

We need the Holy Spirit to be able to…*live by faith not by sight*. 2 Corinthians 5:7

We need the Holy Spirit to be able to…*die to sin…and live a new life*. Romans 6:1&4

We can’t live the Christian life without the Holy Spirit.

Let me be clear, the Holy Spirit isn’t about speaking in tongues or healing or doing miraculous things. He may do that kind of stuff in and through us, but His purpose is not to glorify us. The Holy Spirit is not about my agenda.

The Holy Spirit is about growing fruit in us, the fruit of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is about giving us gifts for ministry, both internally and externally focused. And not to glorify us but to serve God’s purpose and mission.

The thing about those Christians who were scattered out of Jerusalem is that they believed the Good News so seriously that wherever they went they shared it with the people they met, even Samaritans.

Sheryl Baker recently shared this thought written by Margaret Hyman in Hope for an Aching Heart:

*The thing about following God’s lead, He may choose something distasteful to us, and it can be especially difficult to follow as a result. But if we ask Him to lead and He does, we can either fight against the circumstances He brings us or agree that His plans are best. We can obey or go or own way*.

The reason the Holy Spirit was so involved in the lives of those early Christians is because they surrendered their preconceived ideas of what they should be all about in favor of being about the Kingdom of God.

We can be an externally focused church, but it won’t happen by our own power. It will happen because we surrender to the Holy Spirit that He might work in and through us. It will happen because we accept whatever assignment God gives us rather than limiting Him to what we desire.

If Peter and John visited Agape Christian Church would they find that we are a people filled with the Holy Spirit? Or would they find that we’re missing that critical piece?

Let’s make this personal. If Peter and John visited your house, would they find that you’re filled with and led by the Holy Spirit?

If the Holy Spirit withdrew from you, would anything change?

If He withdrew from our church, what would change? Would anyone notice?

         Is what we’re doing making a difference?

         Is what you’re doing making a difference?

My Seminary Professor Doc. Strauss, you’ve heard me talk of him before, had many sayings that stick with me. One is that *most of what the church in America is doing is like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic*.

Think of that image. Somebody shouts, *Ice berg. Right ahead!* Immediately Captain Edward J. Smith giving orders:

         *Get those chairs lined up.*

         *Put them in rows of seven.*

         *Make sure they’re all lined up straight.*

         *I don’t want to see even one chair out of place.*

         *If there’s an extra chair, put it in a closet.*

If the crew obeyed they’d be busy for quite a while, but it would make no difference to 1523 people. It probably wouldn’t matter to the other 667 either.

What if we as a church were to ask the Holy Spirit to fill us like He did the church in Jerusalem? What if each of us decided to ask the Holy Spirit to fill us individually like He did Philip? Do you think we could fill this building with new believers?