



Message #19
“SIMON THE SORCERER”
Acts 8:9-25

In this passage Luke introduces us to another character – Simon Magus (Simon the Sorcerer).

In those days of the mid-1st century, sorcerers and magicians were not uncommon...and were quite influential. They worked wonders, performed healings and exorcisms and practiced astrology. Their wonders may have been magic tricks...or possibly even empowered by Satan (Matt.24:24; 2 Thess.2:9). In Samaria, there was one particular magician, Simon, who was clearly a big deal...and this is his story.

In Acts 8:9-25 we see some great contrast between Simon the sorcerer and Philip the evangelist:

- Simon’s displays of wonder are called “magic” – Philip’s are called “miracles”.
- Simon talks about himself – Philip talks about Jesus.
- After Simon’s magic, people follow him – after Philip’s miracles, people follow Jesus.

The impact of Philip’s ministry in Samaria was quite profound, with many people believing in Jesus and being baptised. Perhaps Simon, seeing his own followers lessen in number as they left to start following Jesus (after Philip’s ministry), realised that there was a greater power at work here than that which he had demonstrated. So it says that he, too, believed and was baptised. Sounds good, doesn’t it? But it looks like it was more a superficial belief, as we shall soon see.

Let’s quickly look at four aspects of Simon that are revealed in this passage.

1. SIMON HAD A WRONG VIEW OF SELF (vs 9-11)

He boasted that he was someone great (vs 9).

Some claimed he was “the Great Power of God”...a claim that it appears he did nothing to refute.

The early Church Fathers reported that Simon was one of the founders of Gnosticism.

Gnosticism (after gnōsis, the Greek word for “knowledge” or “insight”) is the name given to a loosely organized religious and philosophical movement that flourished in the first and second centuries AD. Largely, it is seen as a syncretic mix of Greek and religious philosophies...even fusing elements of deity with humanity.

Simon was obviously good at what he did...and deluded in how he saw himself. He was full of pride.

Pride is a universal and deadly sin...it is the most characteristic and controlling sin of the human condition. It is at the heart of self-deception...and it is pride that keeps us away from God.

“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” (James 4:6)

It is the poor in spirit, not the proud of heart, who experience saving faith.

Why do you think it is so difficult for a proud person to acknowledge the need of a Saviour?

2. SIMON HAD A WRONG VIEW OF SALVATION (vs 12-13)

Simon’s magical arts were no match for Philip’s Spirit-given power.

Whether it was because he recognized a greater power than his, or because his number of followers was diminishing rapidly, Luke records that Simon, also, believed and was baptised....and then he followed Philip, astonished at the great signs and miracles he saw (8:13).

Was it out of jealousy (over Philip’s “power”) or something deeper that caused Philip to believe? It’s hard to tell for sure, though later verses would certainly portray it as a relatively shallow and self-centred experience.

Jealousy seemingly played a big part in Simon’s story. Why is jealousy so dangerous? How can we spot it in our own lives? What can we do to conquer it?

Simon would have been a pretty big “celebrity” in his day. It would have made front-page news when word got out that he, too, was now a “believer”. Does Simon’s story teach us anything about how we should react to the news of modern-day celebrities who profess to be believers?

Baptism is an important thing for Christians. Christ commands His followers to be baptised. It is a very special and significant declaration of our faith in Jesus Christ and in what He has done for us. But baptism does not save us. We are baptised as believers...we don't become believers by being baptised!

3. SIMON HAD A WRONG VIEW OF THE SPIRIT (vs 14-19)

Word of the amazing ministry of Philip in Samaria reached the apostles. Peter and John, representing the apostles, then travelled to Samaria to see for themselves. There were three aspects of their mission:

- To help and support Philip with the spiritual harvest
- To give an apostolic blessing to the work of Philip among the Samaritans
- To pray for the Samaritan believers to receive the Holy Spirit (they had believed, but the Spirit had not come upon them to this point).

These verses are often used by those who argue that the gift of the Holy Spirit is a “second blessing”. And, whilst it is definitely true that there was a delay between the Samaritans believing and the receiving of the Holy Spirit, this is the only occasion where such a situation occurred.

Why are prayer and the laying on of hands here associated with the coming of the Holy Spirit?

Perhaps a reasonable answer lies in the context of deep, historical hatred between Jews and Samaritans.

As Stephen Gaukroger puts it: *“Most likely, the Spirit is withheld until a closer bonding between Jerusalem believers and Samaritan believers can be expressed in the presence of Peter and John. At this stage in the expansion of Christianity, it would be devastating for the Samaritans to encounter the Spirit without ‘encountering’ their fellow Jewish believers. Baptism is into one body (1 Corinthians 12:13), not two – Jewish Christians and Samaritan Christians. Normally, believing and receiving would happen together; this unique missionary situation needed an alternative pattern.”*

It was vitally important at this crucial stage of the spreading out of the evangelizing church, that the Gospel was seen to be valid for ALL people...and what better way to demonstrate that than with the previously, despised Samaritans!

Back to Simon....when he saw the power that the apostles had when they prayed for and laid hands on people...he wanted to be able to have that same power....so he offered to buy this power. But....

Nothing of God is for sale!

4. SIMON HAD THE WRONG VIEW OF SIN (vs 22-24)

After Simon offers to “buy” the power of the Holy Spirit Peter rebukes him strongly, and calls for his repentance. Now, the text is unclear whether Simon does genuinely repent, or simply try to have the apostles pray for him so that he escapes the consequences of his sin.

The point here is that we see our sin as God sees it....it is not just a mistake, an error, a poor judgement. Sin is rebellion against God...and this rebellion of ours led to the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ for us.

Our sin is serious...and we should never dismiss it lightly.

How we view our sin could even have a dramatic impact on how we follow Jesus and worship God.

Why do you follow Jesus/worship God? Make a list of your reasons. Notice how many are “us-centred” (He makes me happy, He saves me...) and how many are “God-centred” (He is the truth, holy, almighty etc). **What can you learn from this simple exercise?**

In what ways does Simon the Sorcerer serve as a warning to you?

Simon had a wrong view of self, salvation the Spirit and sin...it all adds up to a faith that doesn't save. Next week we will see an example of a faith that DOES save!