

Two Men, Two Kingdoms

“But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great” (Acts 8:9).

Devotional

The success of the Gospel in Samaria was not achieved without opposition. That’s why what at first glance seems to be an insignificant vignette about a magician is actually of crucial importance. What we see here is not a contest between two men for public acclaim but a battle between two kingdoms for the souls of the people.

In Samaria, there was a man named Simon who made himself out to be someone great because he could astound the people with magic arts. This apparently was the kind of trickery Pharaoh’s mages performed in opposition to Moses. The Bible is clear that these practices are unacceptable to God (Deuteronomy 18:10–14; Galatians 5:20; Revelation 21:8; 22:15), for they do not originate with Him and frequently are used to oppose His work. In this case, it appears Satan was using Simon to blind the Samaritans to the truth. They were astonished by his powers and agreed that he was a great man, even having the power of God. Despite grave theological errors, the Samaritans did believe in one God, so they apparently thought of Simon as God’s representative.

When Philip arrived, he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus. “The kingdom of God” refers not just to the Gospel but to the kingship and sovereignty of God in this world in opposition to the powers of Satan (which Simon displayed). “The name of Jesus Christ” refers to the full revelation of the Son of God, including His earthly ministry and divine office. Thus, Jesus is portrayed as the King in the kingdom of God. Whether the Samaritans realized it or not, spiritual warfare had broken out in their city.

The Gospel, of course, was victorious. The people lost interest in Simon and paid more attention to Philip. They accepted his message and committed themselves to Christ by requesting baptism. In fact, the verb “baptized” in the Greek indicates continuing action; both men and women were coming to faith in large numbers. As for Simon, Luke says he also believed and was baptized. He apparently realized that someone greater and more powerful than himself had come, so he joined the crowd. But there is a hint of trouble. Luke notes that Simon stayed close to Philip and paid close attention to the miracles performed through him. The sorcerer’s interest in obtaining supernatural power for his own use had not vanished.

CORAM DEO

As we look around the cultural landscape today, we see a wide variety of spiritual practices that do not please God. Satan uses these practices to blind people to the truth and hold them in darkness. We must confront these practices, in prayer and word. Seek to enlighten your friends to ungodly practices in their lives. Speak out boldly.¹

Open it

1. When you were younger, was there ever something that you wanted so badly that you were willing to pay anything for it? Was it worth the price you paid?

Read it

Acts 8:9–25

Explore it

2. What did Simon do that impressed the people of Samaria?
3. Who was preaching the gospel in Samaria at this time?
4. Who believed in the gospel message?
5. Who came to Samaria to help with the flood of new converts?
6. What power of the Apostles' did Simon covet?
7. What was Peter's response to Simon's coveting?

¹ Devotional by Ligonier Ministries and can be found @ <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/two-men-two-kingdoms/>

Apply it

The persecuted, persevering, and proclaiming church experienced God's power in a marvelous way in Samaria. This was nothing less than an awakening—the kind for which we often find ourselves praying. But, like all movements of God, the devil notices what is happening and follows close at hand. It would seem from this passage that, although many demons were exorcised, at least one escaped detection. This one was dwelling in a man by the name of Simon.²

8. Acts 8:7–8 reminds us that there is an invisible spiritual realm where the devil is doing all he can to oppose the gospel's advancement. Where do we see glimpses of this invisible spiritual battle going on today?

9. How does knowing that our efforts in spreading the gospel are being threatened by demonic forces change our approach for evangelism?

10. The Apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:4, *"In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."* How is the devil blinding people from seeing the gospel today?

IT'S MAGIC TIME

The story of Simon is a strange one, and a significant one. It serves as a cautionary tale against all who would attempt to reduce spiritual matters to commodities. It needs to be understood that a magician in the first century **was not like a magician in our day**. In our day, all but the gullible watch magicians knowing that it is a trick. Our response to a magician is, "How did he do that?" In the first century, a magician was considered to be a man with real spiritual power. Likely, he did have a kind of power, though, of course, we would see that power as emanating from the kingdom of darkness and not from God.

² Sermon by Pastor Doug Van Meter found @ <http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/gospel-progress/>

Clinton Arnold notes that “although no hard examples of first-century Samaritan practices of magic survive today, over 230 papyrus documents have been discovered illustrating the practice of magic generally for the Greco-Roman period.” He then quotes an example from “a Greek magical papyrus discovered in Egypt and now housed in the British Museum in London.”

Come to me, spirit that flies in the air, called with secret codes and unutterable names, at this lamp divination which I perform, and enter into the boy’s soul, that he may receive the immortal form in mighty and incorruptible light, because while chanting, I call, “IAO ELOAI MARMACHADA MENEPHO MERMAI IEOR AIEO EREPHIE PHEREPHIO CHANDOUCH AMON EREPNEU ZONOR AKLEUA MENETHONI KADALAPEU IO PLAITINE RE [an additional seventeen magical names are called upon].

This gives us a bit of a sense of the kinds of things Simon Magus was likely doing. He was likely invoking spiritual powers that had bound him and were binding others in spiritual darkness. It is into this charged atmosphere that Philip comes with the gospel.³

11. How would Simon’s sorcery have created a buzz in the first century? What is it about sorcery and fortune telling/astrology that capture the attention of so many in our culture today?

In what subtle ways do Christians allow similar types of sorcery into their lives unknowingly?

12. What was Philip doing in verses 5–8 that mesmerized the crowds? How could Simon’s influence on this city have confused people’s view of Philip’s ministry?

The town’s most notorious celebrity was a sleight-of-hand artist named Simon—early Christian literature calls him “Simon Magus.” He wowed the local citizens with illusions (“magic” tricks) and sorceries. Sorcery involved occult practices and, often, drug-induced “magical” effects. (“Just snort a little of this white powder and voila! you’re off to la-la land!” One “trip” and you’re convinced the drug dealer is “God’s man of faith and power!”)

³ Sermon by Wyman Lewis Richardson found @ <http://www.walkingtogetherministries.com/2014/08/26/acts-89-25/>

When this first-century magician saw Philip's miracles—paralytics walking, demon-harassed people restored to sanity (Acts 8: 7)—he was impressed. These were not illusions! No tricks, no drugs, no hallucinations. Simon's skills as an illusionist and sorcerer convinced the Samaritans he had a pipeline to God (Acts 8:10). Simon "believed," and Philip baptized him (Acts 8:13 NKJV). His faith appeared to be sincere. After his baptism Simon followed Philip everywhere, like a wizard's apprentice, trying to figure out the evangelist's "magic."⁴

13. Luke tells us that the most popular and well-known Samaritan got saved. Why do Christians today make such a big deal of well-known people coming to Jesus?

14. Simon's profession seemed to be connected to a selfish desire to gain more power. What are some selfish reasons people come to Jesus today?

When presenting the gospel, how can we unintentionally mislead people who come to Jesus with such preconceived ideas?

HERE COME THE HEAD HONCHOS

Big guns from Jerusalem, Peter and John, were dispatched to check out what was happening in Samaria. Philip was a "new kid on the block." He needed help. Many Samaritans believed and were baptized in Jesus' name, but something was missing: *"As yet He [the Holy Spirit] had fallen upon none of them"* (Acts 8:16 NKJV). Usually, the gift of the Spirit came with believing in Jesus (Acts 2:38; 10:44). **What tipped the evangelist and apostles off that the Holy Spirit had not yet been given to the Samaritans?**

⁴ Girard, Robert C.. The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 1886-1890). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

- It may have been the absence of visible spiritual gifts—speaking in new languages, sharing spiritual insights, caring for one another, etc.
- It may have been the absence of spiritual life—liveliness of spirit—eagerness for spiritual things, thirst for fellowship, worship, knowledge of Christ.
- It may have been confusion left over from the Samaritans’ involvement in the occult, drugs, and other deceptions of Simon’s magic—things Peter exposed in Acts 8:20–23.
- It may have been special knowledge or insight given by the Holy Spirit—the “gift of discernment”—that tipped the leaders off to what was missing.⁵

While each of these seem to have some merit, Steve Cole adds another possibility:

I think that God withheld the giving of the Spirit so that the early church would not be split into a Jewish section and a rival Samaritan section. The Samaritan believers had to be subject to the authority of the apostles, even if they didn’t naturally like the Jews. The Jewish apostles and other believers had to accept the Samaritans’ salvation as genuine, as evidenced by the gift of the Holy Spirit, even if they weren’t naturally inclined to put the Samaritans on the same level as the Jews. But the point is, this is an exceptional passage, not a pattern for us to follow. The norm is spelled out clearly in the epistles. True believers receive the Holy Spirit at the moment of salvation.⁶

15. Why did God delay in pouring out His Spirit on these new Samaritan converts? When interpreting this passage, what extremes should we be wary of?

16. How do we know if someone has become a Christian? What types of evidences should we look for before we give new converts a full assurance of their profession of faith?

17. How can a person’s previous experiences hinder them from fully embracing Jesus and the new life He brings? What bad or sinful habits were difficult for you to give up even after becoming a Christian?

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Sermon by Pastor Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-20-why-we-must-proclaim-gospel-acts-84-25>

WHATCHA' TALKING ABOUT, SIMON!!!

After the apostles laid their hands on the Samaritans, they received the Holy Spirit. Simon saw this event, and he audaciously offered the apostles money (v. 19) to impart the Spirit's power to him. Luke records Peter's fierce reply (vv. 20–23) and Simon's response (v. 24). Perhaps Simon theorized that if he could possess the power he witnessed, he could make quite a profit for himself. He is clearly ignorant about the nature of the Spirit in this passage, perhaps thinking the Spirit an impersonal force that can be manipulated rather than as a divine person to whom he is to yield and by whom he should live.

Peter sharply rebukes him, essentially saying, "To hell with you and your money!" He sees in Simon a complete misunderstanding of God and His grace. Simon's misunderstanding was so serious, in fact, that Peter adds, "You have no part or share in this matter, because your heart is not right before God" (v. 21). In Acts, Luke uses the word "share" to mean either "ministry" (1:17) or "participation in salvation" (26:18). The latter option seems the best application here.

Peter condemns Simon as one who does not have Christ's salvation. But then Peter, who has just consigned him and his money to hell, calls Simon to repentance (vv. 23–24), which is a command typically delivered to the unregenerate (2:38; 3:19; 17:30; 26:20). Peter knew Simon was in extreme danger because his heart was so corrupt before God. Rather than possessing a humble faith that receives God's good gifts, Simon thought he could manipulate, control, and pay God off. Such wickedness, which was exposed in his question, was met with Peter's gracious and stern exhortation (see vv. 23–24). Peter perceives that Simon is poisoned in hostility ("bitterness," see Deuteronomy 29:18) and enslaved to sin ("bound by wickedness"). He tells him to pray, without presuming on God's grace ("if possible"), and to ask the Lord for forgiveness. Simon then responds in what seems to be sincerity (v. 24).⁷

18. Peter speaks quite bluntly and forcibly to Simon about his error. When is it right, if ever, for a believer to take this "in your face" approach with someone?

19. We are given no clear answer as to whether or not Simon was truly repentant. Based on the information found in the text, do you think that Simon became a believer? Explain your answer.

⁷ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 2802-2820). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

SOME IMPORTANT CLOSING THOUGHTS

There are four closing thoughts that we must examine in light of our text this week:

- Throughout history, the church has always faced the problem of false professions of faith. Where Christ saves sheep, the devil sends goats; where Christ sows wheat, the devil sows tares. Wherever there are genuine conversions there are also counterfeits. Such is church life. But this should not deter us from proclaiming the gospel and from offering a judgement of charity towards those who seem to be the real deal.
- At the same time, we need to beware of the enemy's strategies to infiltrate the church, and we must speak straight when they are detected.
- Realize that there are many motives that may drive someone to identify himself as a believer. Don't assume too much. Those who are the real deal feel the weight of their guilt. They sorrow with genuine repentance. The true believer looks at what he can give to the Lord more than what he can receive from Him.
- Examine yourself: Why are you following Christ? Simon was not really interested in bringing the Holy Spirit to others; he was interested in the power and the prestige it would bring to himself.

20. Choose one of the four applications from above and share with your group why you think that particular application point is important for the church to address.