



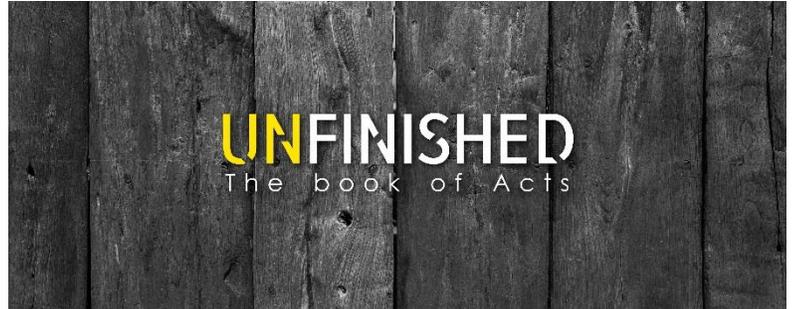
VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Unfinished

Part 15: The Curious Case of Simon the Magician — Acts 8:9–25

Steve Lombardo | December 17, 2017



How many of you have seen the new *Star Wars* movie? How many people love the *Star Wars* series? How many people don't care? All right, an equal number. This past Friday my middle child, Tyrus, and I went to the movie. I won't spoil it for those of you who want to see it. *Star Wars* has been an incredibly popular franchise over the last four decades. As a matter of fact, in 2012, Disney bought Lucasfilm for \$4 billion. So obviously it's worth a lot.

Why is it so popular? There are many different reasons, and I might offend some *Star Wars* nerds here, but I would propose that part of the reason for its popularity is that it represents the idea of power. The Force, an important part of the movie, is an energy field which we're told "exists between all living things." That's from Episode Four, where Obi-Wan Kenobi explained the Force to Luke. There are people who can manipulate or control the Force, for good or for the dark side. Ordinary people can have the ability to use the Force in a powerful way.

I think this is one of the reasons the show is so popular—we love power and we love the underdog. We love the Rocky Balboas of the world. We love the Rudys. We love nobodies who can rise up and do great and powerful things, who have a certain power that people are attracted to.

I will tell you about one part of the movie. Luke Skywalker is standing against an army of machines and cannons and lasers, all firing at him, so we expect to see him destroyed. After they decide nobody could live through their attack, they call a ceasefire. But as the smoke clears, we see Luke walking away, brushing the dust off himself. That was really cool—he came out unscathed.

We like to root for the underdog, don't we? We like to cheer for someone who becomes strong and does mighty deeds, even though they might have had the most humble beginning. We'll see a similar situation in our story today from Acts 8. There is a pursuit of power. The weak apostles are being strong. There are miraculous events. There's drama. This is all found in the story I'm calling "The Curious Case of Simon the Magician." Let's start with verse nine:

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great."¹¹ And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. ¹² But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. ¹³ Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

¹⁴ Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, ¹⁵ who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹ saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."²⁰ But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!

²¹ You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. ²² Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³ For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity."

²⁴ And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

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.

Simon said he was a great man.

Simon said to himself that *“he himself was somebody great”* (verse nine). Red flags should pop up right away when you hear a statement like that. If you have to do self-promotion to convince others that you’re something, that’s a red flag. It means you’re probably not all you think you are. Simon was the LaVar Ball of his day. You *Star Wars* nerds don’t know who that is. He’s the guy who said he could beat Michael Jordan one on one. He was a self-promoting individual.

Simon the magician acted the same way. But he had a special status among the Samaritans. Let me review what Tim told us last week about the Samaritans. In the first century, the Samaritans lived between the Galilean region to the north and Judea in the south. In the book of Acts, we see the disciples spreading into Samaria, just as Jesus had commanded them to do in 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 end of the earth.”*

The Samaritans were the people who were left when the nation of Israel was conquered and taken into captivity in 587 B.C. by the Babylonians. The Babylonians had a practice of bringing other nationalities into the lands they had conquered to intermarry with those people who remained. Their intent was that the Jewish culture would eventually be forgotten and the nation of Israel would be no more. The Samaritans in Acts were the offspring of this mixture of nationalities. They were therefore despised by the Jewish people. The Samaritans still knew the law of Moses, but they practiced a mixture of Jewish and pagan customs, as you can read about in 2 Kings 17.

There were four main problems that the Jewish people had with the Samaritans. (I gained this information from gotquestions.org, which is a great resource for biblical knowledge.)

- First, when the Jews returned from Babylon, they sought to rebuild their temple. While Nehemiah was engaged with rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls, the Samaritans vigorously opposed this work, as we read in Nehemiah 6.
- Another reason the Jews despised the Samaritans was that they had built their own temple on Mount Gerizim and had claimed it as the right place to worship. In fact, there are some 800 Samaritans alive today who still offer sacrifices on that mountain.
- Third, Samaria became a place of refuge for all Judean outlaws. They willingly received Jewish criminals and refugees from justice. People who had violated the Jewish laws and had been excommunicated found safety in Samaria, greatly increasing the hatred which existed between the two nations.
- Finally, the Samaritans accepted the five books of Moses, but they rejected the writings of the prophets and the other Jewish writings.

These causes together produced irreconcilable differences between the two nations. The Jewish people said the Samaritans were the worst of the human race. You can feel this tension in John 8:48 when the religious authorities said to Jesus, *“Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?”* The Samaritans were a despised people. But Jesus broke those barriers. In John 4 He speaks to a Samaritan woman at the well. And in our story today, the apostles follow Jesus’ example. They’re in Samaria and God is doing a mighty work in the lives of these people.

Simon had a special status among the Samaritans as a practitioner of magic.

Simon was a local celebrity in Samaria, because he practiced sorcery—or as the ESV renders it, magic. It’s the same Greek word that is used in the story of the Magi who visited Bethlehem. These were wise men who came from the east to worship Jesus, the newborn King. They are generally seen in a positive light in Matthew, but here in Acts Luke uses this word with a negative implication.

One other place where this term is used negatively is found in Acts 13:6: *“When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus.”* Here Luke directly connects magic with false prophecy:

⁷ He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. ⁸ But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. ⁹ But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him ¹⁰ and said, “You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? ¹¹ And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be

blind and unable to see the sun for a time.” Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand.

This magician was clearly working evil, so we can assume that Luke saw Simon the sorcerer in a similar light. We don’t know exactly what Simon did, but whatever it was amazed the people. It could have been astrology, the view that certain future events can be predicted through the position of the planets and stars. Or it could have been actual demonic spiritual power that allowed Simon to control or manipulate things in a way that imitated miracles. Or he might simply have been a great illusionist, like our modern-day magicians. David Copperfield made the Statue of Liberty disappear. That wasn’t spiritual at all. It’s possible that Simon could have practiced a kind of sorcery that combined several different methods, giving him this special status among the Samaritans.

Application: Be careful in the pursuit of the applause of man (John 12:43).

As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Simon loved the attention that his powers gave him. But we need to be careful when we receive human applause. Some applause is not wrong or dangerous. It can be a good thing to work hard and then be recognized for our work. Or someone who has served faithfully for years can rightly be honored for their service. Public recognition is not wrong in itself. But the problem arises when we define our identity based on what other people think of us. When we do this, their opinions control whether we are happy or sad. This kind of thinking can begin when we’re children. Perhaps you had a mother or father who showed you affection only when you accomplished something they deemed important. Your family life could be miserable except when you earned good grades or when you made the team, so your parents were proud of you then. That’s when you felt their love. But otherwise there was no unconditional love, so your identity was rooted in what you did to make your parents “love” you. When you did good things, you received the affection then.

These tendencies can continue into junior high and high school, where the quest for popularity takes center stage. You start to say and do things you never would have done on your own, but now you do these things to be accepted, and hopefully celebrated, by the people around you. Maybe you struggle with the idea of God’s grace and unconditional love, not based on the things you do, but based on the grace-work Jesus did on the cross.

I remember that first experience in seventh grade, when something was put before me that I never would have thought about doing on my own—smoking a cigarette. I don’t know if kids struggle with that these days, but back then another kid offered me a cigarette to smoke. Wanting to gain some applause from the people around me and to be part of the peer group, it was a real temptation to me. I didn’t do it though. If it weren’t for others, I never would have considered that on my own.

Sadly, this temptation to seek the applause of man rather than God continues on into adulthood. It could happen when you break out a credit card to spend money you don’t have to buy stuff you don’t want to impress people you don’t even like. We are so concerned about what people think of us. This affects everyone. Don’t think pastors are immune to it—they may think, “I’m not going to preach or teach the hard things. I’d rather say things that tickle people’s ears, so they’ll think highly of me.” This is an insidious sin.

We find a sad example of this in John 12:36–43, where Jesus dealt with the unbelief of the people:

³⁶ When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them. ³⁷ Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, ³⁸ so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” ³⁹ Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, ⁴⁰ “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.”

⁴¹ Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him. ⁴² Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³ for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

This is so sad. Do you think these people were saved? It says they believed. Jesus said, “*So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven*” (Matthew 10:32–33). These people had a sense that Jesus was right in what He said and they saw His miraculous works—but for fear of man, they refused to acknowledge Him as Christ the Lord. Be careful in your pursuit of man’s applause.

Application: Take seriously the reality of the spiritual world.

Whether or not this sorcery was genuinely powerful spiritually, we know there are dark and evil forces in our world. Our small groups this past week discussed the modern fascination with psychic phenomena and mediums. When we were in our spiritual warfare sermon series a few years ago, I spoke with a couple, both of whom had walked with the Lord for a long time. The woman

told me that the previous week she had gone with her daughter to a psychic, just for fun. They didn't think much about it. But the sermon that day had convicted her.

We need to take seriously the evil things that can be disguised as things of light. A fun time might not be so innocent. Be very careful with horoscopes, psychics, Ouija boards, fortune tellers and that sort of thing. There is an invisible spiritual world that is very real.

Simon seemed to be a follower of Jesus.

Simon believed and was baptized.

We see in Acts 8:13 that Simon believed and was baptized as a believer. He was caught up in the excitement and celebration of the mighty movement of God that was unfolding before him. He undoubtedly felt pressure to go along with the other people who were responding to what God was doing. Verse 11 is especially interesting. The people in Samaria had *"paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic."* Then in verse 13, it is Simon himself who is amazed by the signs and miracles he was witnessing. He's gone from being the one who amazed and impressed people to realizing there was a bigger and more powerful presence in their midst.

Application: Examine yourself to see if you are truly saved.

As the story continues, we'll see that Simon revealed that his heart was not right. Even though he believed in some sense and even though he was baptized, his heart was not right with God. We too should test ourselves to see whether we are truly in the faith, as it says in 2 Corinthians 13:5: *"Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!"*

There are two extremes that people have when evaluating their own faith. One is to always question their salvation. This person has no peace or assurance—they only hope they're saved. The other extreme is to live with the "once saved always saved" mantra. "I said a prayer some time ago, so that means I'm definitely saved." I think the healthy response is somewhere in the middle.

We definitely can have peace and assurance of our right standing before God. In John 10 Jesus tells us that He laid down His life so we could have eternal life. We're in His hands and no one can snatch us out of His hands. There is an assurance available to us, when we truly understand what has been written in the New Testament.

But self-evaluation is also necessary, as the Scriptures remind us. The Apostle Paul also told us we must work out our salvation with fear and trembling. Throughout the pages of Scripture there are warnings: *"Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life"* (Galatians 6:7–8).

In other words, we live in tension and instead should strive to live the way the Lord has called us to live. We know that our salvation is not based on our works, but the way we live our lives accurately reveals our hearts. You might ask, "How do I know I'm a Christian?" If you can't point to a prayer—if you can't even point to a baptism—how do you know? But baptism doesn't save you, and just praying doesn't save you.

I usually take people to John 15 when I'm asked about salvation. Jesus is talking about being the true vine, and He says this:

⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

What you should ask as you examine yourself—and the question Simon could have asked himself—is this, "Do I have abiding faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? Do I truly believe He died in my place and that the blood He shed on Calvary paid for my sin? Do I believe I've been forgiven and made right with God, the Creator of the universe?" Even in the tough times when your faith is battered, are you holding on?

The second evidence of authentic salvation is bearing fruit. In John 15:8, Jesus said, *"By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples."* As we examine ourselves, we must ask if we have abiding faith and if we are bearing fruit. We may not do these things perfectly or without falling down, but there should be real evidence of faith and fruit in our lives.

Simon showed his true colors.

His heart was not right, and he tried to hustle God.

Simon revealed that his heart was not right when he said to Peter, *“Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”* Simon watched the power that was being shown and wanted it for himself. He thought, “If people were amazed by me before, but they’re not so much anymore, I need this power to ratchet up my influence. I need some of what Peter and John have.” For Simon, the way to get that power was to pay the apostles in silver.

His heart wasn’t right, and Peter called him out on it in Acts 8:21–22: *“You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours.”* In other words, Peter told him the gospel was not something that could be bought. The Holy Spirit can’t be bought. You can’t hustle God.

Application: Do not think you can put God in your debt.

Simon was trying to use his money to get from God the power to amaze people again. We do this all the time—not with money, but with our thinking. We think, “I live for God and try to do what’s right and follow the rules. I shun evil in my life and live according to God’s Word.” But then tragedy happens and what do we do? We’re tempted to cry out to God, “How could You let this happen, after all I’ve done for You? I’ve tried to live according to Your Word and do Your will—and now this?” We’ve been tricked into thinking God is in our debt because of the good we’ve done. God is in no one’s debt.

Sadly, we see people who come to church and for a season they seem to be on fire. They’re there every time the church is open. They’re saying the right things. They’re doing the right things. They’re lifting their hands in worship. They’re serious Christians. But when something difficult happens, they’re gone. In the middle of tragedy, they say, “I’m outta here!” In my years of ministry, I’ve seen this far more often than I would ever wish.

In our theological debates we want to ask, “Were they really saved, or weren’t they?” I don’t think that’s the right question. The question should be: why did they believe God was in their debt? They thought God was essentially a heavenly vending machine. “If I put in the right works, then I’ll get the thing I’m after.” For many, God becomes a genie in the sky, waiting to grant our wishes. But when we find out God is not in our debt, that’s when we shake our fists at Him and leave.

God does not owe us. As we read in 1 Corinthians 6:19–20, we are indebted to Him: *“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”* You were bought with a price. God is not in your debt—you’re in His debt. He paid the price for your soul. He paid the price for your forgiveness. He paid the price for your eternity. Therefore, glorify God in all that you do.

Simon left scared and sorrowful.

Our story winds up with Simon leaving the group, afraid and sorrowful. One of the last questions in our small group study was this: do you think Simon was saved? We talked about it, and some were optimistic, while others were not. But traditionally it is believed he was not saved.

We don’t know if tradition is right, but let me read you an excerpt from “The Apostolic Constitutions”—a fourth-century document outlining some rules of moral conduct, liturgy and church organization. This document says that after the incident in Acts 8, Simon went to Rome. There, “he mightily disturbed the church and subverted many and brought them over to himself and astonished the Gentiles with his skill and magic, insomuch that they, in the middle of the day, went to their theater.”

The people came to the theater; Peter was also there. Simon promised he would fly in the air. As all the people watched in suspense, Simon actually rose up in the air through some sort of sorcery. At least that’s written in church tradition. But Peter commanded him to come down, so Simon fell, breaking his legs. The people then acknowledged that there is only one true God, the God of Peter. Of course, this isn’t Scripture, but it’s part of church tradition that testifies to Simon perverting the gospel and therefore was in fact lost.

What we do have is Simon’s words in Acts 8:24: *“Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.”* That’s not repentance. He might have just been scared. He might have been afraid that the crowds he once amazed were no longer on his side. He was not only scared; he was sorrowful as well. But we really don’t know more than that.

Conclusion: A true disciple of Christ does these things.

As we've been examining ourselves through the various application points, we should be able to discern what characterizes a true disciple of Jesus Christ.

A true disciple of Jesus Christ receives the Word of God and is filled with the Holy Spirit.

We have this interesting case of the Samaritans receiving the Holy Spirit after they believed and were baptized. We believe and teach that the Holy Spirit comes upon a person the moment they are saved. Whatever point in time a person becomes a Christian—even if it was gradual—when they became saved, the Holy Spirit came to live within them. So what is happening here? The Samaritans believe and are baptized, but then they're not yet filled with the Holy Spirit. After the apostles arrive and pray for these people, they then receive the Holy Spirit.

I love our small group. Our group came up with four different possibilities in this regard. We concluded that it seems that, for the sake of unity between the Samaritans and Jews, the apostles would come and bless and pray for these people, resulting in their receiving the Spirit as a demonstration of the solidarity between the two cultures. They were no longer separated, but were one people of God. The gospel had now come in power to these despised people. It proved that Jesus' love and salvation was as much for the Samaritans as it was for anyone else. Acts 1:8 was coming true and there was now only one Christian church.

Have you received the Word of God? John 1:12 says, *"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."* Have you received Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? If you have, then you are filled with the Holy Spirit.

A true disciple of Jesus Christ connects with other disciples in community, which is the church.

The Samaritans are saved and the Holy Spirit comes upon them. They are together in unity as one people. As you've received Christ and are filled with the Holy Spirit, you are called to be part of His church. There's no such thing as unchurched Christians. You might go through a season when you've been hurt by the church, or you may leave one church and still be looking for another. But you should land somewhere in Christian community in the church.

A true disciple of Jesus Christ lives by the power the Spirit gives.

The Spirit comes and indwells us, enabling us to live and do the things God calls us to do. By His power, we live. So we pray that the Holy Spirit would empower us. As believers, He filled us the moment we're saved. But then we desire that He would have more and more of us—that we wouldn't quench His work, but would live in His power.

So let's learn from this curious case of Simon. Be careful in the pursuit of the applause of man. Examine yourself to see if you are saved. And do not think you can put God in your debt. He's in nobody's debt.