

## Chapter 20: The Bond of Iniquity

*Acts 8:9–25*

As the mission of the gospel into Samaria gains more traction in Acts 8, many believe and are baptized through the preaching of Philip. Yet, one of those who professes faith is not presented in the same way as the others. Formerly, he had been a powerful and influential magician. On the one hand, he is not envious of the Christians, but is, in fact, intrigued by the power of the Christians and the signs that they perform. Yet, when he offers to pay money to gain the ability the apostles had to confer the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands, we learn that his faith was not like the others who had believed. They trusted in the name of the Lord, but he never strayed far from his desire for power. From this story, we see that *the gospel of Jesus announces great forgiveness, not great power.*

### False Faith (Acts 8:9–13)

As the gospel progresses into Samaria, Luke introduces us to “a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city” (v. 9a). The Samaritans were not only mixed in their ethnic ancestry, but also in religion. Although even the Samaritan version of the Pentateuch forbid the use of magic and sorcery (e.g., Deut. 18:9–14), this magician named Simon “amazed the people” and claimed that “he himself was somebody great” (v. 9b).<sup>1</sup> Luke then tells us, “They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, ‘This man is the power of God that is called Great’” (v. 10). Importantly, the word for “paid attention” here in v. 10 (and again in v. 11) had also appeared in Acts 8:6 to describe how the crowds were now “paying attention” to Philip. Here, Luke is giving the back-story to explain the *status quo* that Philip had disrupted when he began preaching the gospel in Samaria. Before Philip, the people had held Simon in such high esteem that they believed God had manifested his power in and through him.<sup>2</sup>

Although the people paid attention to Simon because “he had amazed them with his magic” (v. 11), it is the *preaching* of Philip to which the Samaritans latch onto: “But when they believed Philip as he preached good news...” (v. 12). The preaching here centers first on “the kingdom of God” (v.

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<sup>1</sup> The Samaritan Pentateuch largely followed the Hebrew Pentateuch as we have it today, but with specific differences, especially to emphasize the Samaritan city of Shechem and the Samaritan Mount Gerizim (see Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2012), 77). For the text of the Samaritan Pentateuch, see Moshe Florentin and Abraham Tal, *The Samaritan Pentateuch: An English Translation with a Parallel Annotated Hebrew Text* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2024), and the text of Deut. 18:9–14 can be found on pp. 825–26.

<sup>2</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 319–20.

12b), in the first use of the word “kingdom” since Jesus’ discussions with his disciples in Acts 1:3–6.<sup>3</sup> Second, Philip is preaching about “the name of Jesus Christ” (v. 12c)—that is, about the power and salvation of God extended through the name of Jesus: “...repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed *in his name* to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). After the Samaritan people believe the preaching of Philip, we read that “they were baptized, both men and women” (v. 12d). Importantly, the move from new believers to baptism in Samaria echo the response of the Jews in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41).<sup>4</sup> Additionally, as Saul’s persecution in “house after house” (Acts 8:3) echoed the breaking of bread in the early church in “house after house” (Acts 2:46), so this description of the “men and women” baptized echoes the persecution described in Acts 8:3: “he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.” This subtle point is important. Saul had sought to dismantle the community in language that echoes the way that it had been built up (from house to house). Now, though, the church is increasing in language that echoes Saul’s efforts at persecution (among both men and women). Saul’s plans are backfiring.

Intriguingly, Luke tells us that “Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed” (v. 13). In light of Peter’s stern rebuke of Simon’s spiritual condition later (“your heart is not right with God... you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity”; vv. 21, 23), what should we make of the fact that Luke tells us here that Simon “believed”? Polhill makes two important observations that suggest Luke is subtly pointing out flaws in Simon’s “faith” from the very beginning. First, Polhill notes that, in contrast to the faith of the Samaritans, “There is no object given for his believing—no ‘kingdom of God,’ no ‘name of Jesus Christ.’”<sup>5</sup> Second, in further departure from the faith of the Samaritans to the preaching of Philip, Luke tells us something different about Simon: “after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed” (v. 13b). The language of “continued” suggests that Simon followed Philip around, which “is not the normal way of describing discipleship,” but might instead suggest a kind of clinginess.<sup>6</sup> Further, as Simon follows Philip around, we still do not hear that Simon takes any interest in what Philip is preaching, but only that he was amazed by the “signs and great miracles performed.” The one who had formerly *amazed* people (v. 9) by his magic is now himself *amazed* by Philip’s miracles. Polhill therefore observes, “the only response connected with his baptism was his following Philip everywhere, totally entranced by his miraculous signs.”<sup>7</sup>

Although Simon had claimed that “he himself was somebody *great*” (v. 9), the magician had discovered someone who was *greater* by his “signs and *great* miracles” (v. 13). Simon therefore becomes interested in how “to enhance his personal power.”<sup>8</sup> Luke tells the story to conceal this deeper motivation for the moment, and the effect is that we do not easily discern issues until those

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<sup>3</sup> “This is one of eight uses of the term “kingdom” in Acts but is the first since Jesus spoke to the disciples about it during his forty days with them after the resurrection (Acts 1:3–6 [2x]; 8:12; 14:21–22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 30–31). God’s rule appears in what Philip is doing.” (Bock, *Acts*, 328.)

<sup>4</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 321.

<sup>5</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 217.

<sup>6</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 329.

<sup>7</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 217.

<sup>8</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 329.

become manifest later. We see Simon believing like those around him, and we assume that his faith is genuine until he proves otherwise. This is an important principle that the church is always encountering as we try to discern a credible profession of faith from believers. In the judgment of charity, we take them at their word unless and until some kind of unrepentant sin casts doubt on the credibility of their profession. Calvin writes about this well:

But there be many who howsoever they be not regenerate with the Spirit of adoption, and do not addict themselves unto God with the true affection of the heart, being overcome with the power of the Word, do not only confess that that is true which is taught, but are also touched with some fear of God, so that they receive doctrine; for they conceive that God must be heard; that he is both the author and also the judge of the world. Therefore, they make no semblance of faith before men, which is none, but they think that they believe. And this faith continueth only for a time, whereof Christ speaketh in Mark, (Mark 4; Luke 8:13;) to wit, when the seed of the Word conceived in the mind is, notwithstanding, choked forthwith with divers cares of the world, or with wicked affections, so that it never cometh to any ripeness; yea, rather, it groweth out of kind unto unprofitable corn nothing worth. Such, therefore, was Simon's faith; he perceiveth that the doctrine of the gospel is true, and he is enforced to receive the same with the feeling of his conscience; but the groundwork is wanting; that is, the denial of himself.<sup>9</sup>

Not all who claim “faith” genuinely possess *saving* faith, even when they profess right doctrine. As James reminds us, “Even the demons believe—and shudder!” (Jas. 2:19).

### Full Equality (Acts 8:14–17)

As an evangelist (Acts 21:8), Philip does not labor under his own authority. Although he has moved some distance from Jerusalem, where the apostles had remained (Acts 8:1), the apostles continue to extend interest and oversight over his work. So, “when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (vv. 14–16). It is interesting to remember that it was John who, “with his brother James, had once suggested that they should, Elijah-like, bring down fire from heaven on a Samaritan community for its inhospitable behaviour to their Master (Luke 9:52ff.).”<sup>10</sup> Now, by praying for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit, Peter and John acknowledge that the Samaritans are on equal footing with Jews through the gospel of Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

What does this mean, though, that the Holy Spirit “had not yet fallen on any of them,” and that “they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (v. 16)? Certainly, this cannot mean that

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<sup>9</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:334–35.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 180–81.

<sup>11</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 285.

the Holy Spirit had remained apart from them altogether: “They had been baptized as believers, they had received Word and sacrament and all that Word and sacrament bestow, the Holy Spirit in their hearts, and thus regeneration, conversion, justification, the power of a new life, in a word, salvation. They had received the supreme gifts of the Spirit ‘only,’ but these are invisible.”<sup>12</sup> Instead, what they lacked were “those singular gifts wherewith God would have certain endued at the beginning of the gospel to beautify Christ’s kingdom.”<sup>13</sup> So, when the apostles do indeed lay hands on the Samaritans so that “they received the Holy Spirit” (v. 17), Polhill writes, “It is not without justification that many refer to this as the ‘Samaritan Pentecost.’ It is a major stage of salvation history. The Spirit as it were indicated in a visible manifestation the divine approval of this new missionary step beyond Judaism.”<sup>14</sup> While Luke does not give any details about what happened when the Holy Spirit fell upon them, Schnabel is correct: “There must have been a visible or audible manifestation of the coming of the Spirit that prompted Simon to think that he might acquire the ability to convey the Spirit from the apostles through money (vv. 18–19),” and likely the same kind of speaking in tongues that had taken place on the day of Pentecost.<sup>15</sup>

### Forgiveness for the Heart (Acts 8:18–25)

Previously, Luke mixed his description of Simon’s hypocritical faith alongside the genuine faith of the other Samaritans. While Luke had dropped a couple of small hints, Simon now unwittingly betrays the falseness of his faith: “Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, saying, ‘Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit’” (vv. 18–19). As Calvin notes, Simon did not necessarily know that he was hypocritical, for he “believed” in some sense (v. 12). Nevertheless, in Simon’s case, the “doctrine pierceth not unto the hidden affections of the heart, but the inward uncleanness lieth hidden there.”<sup>16</sup> The greed of Ananias and Sapphira had led them to cling to money while trying to “lie to the Holy Spirit” (Acts 5:3), and here Simon tries to use money as a tool to bring the power of the Holy Spirit under his control. In both cases, the sinners demean the power and authority of the Holy Spirit.<sup>17</sup> Yet, whereas Ananias and Sapphira lusted after money, Simon lusted after power.

At this request, Peter rebukes Simon in the strongest terms: “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 neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity’” (vv. 20–23). Simon deserved to “perish” because he had blasphemously sought to buy God’s power with money.<sup>18</sup> The

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<sup>12</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 325.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:338–39.

<sup>14</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 218.

<sup>15</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 412.

<sup>16</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:341.

<sup>17</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 327–28.

<sup>18</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:342–43.

“matter” in which Simon had “neither part nor lot” is the word often translated as “word” (λόγος; *logos*); however, this “matter” does not refer to the “word of God” (as in Acts 8:4), but “the bestowal of the gift of the Spirit, which is the substance of Simon’s request.”<sup>19</sup> Simon’s request has revealed his bankrupt spiritual condition, showing that he remains consumed by bitterness and enslaved to sin.<sup>20</sup> Even so, Peter calls upon Simon to *repent* to seek the Lord’s forgiveness (v. 22). Importantly, this is the same message Philip had preached that the other Samaritans had believed, but Simon seems to have missed it, amazed as he was by the signs Philip performed. How will Simon react now? Bock writes, “Peter is testing Simon’s heart with this rebuke. Simon’s response indicates where he is in relationship to God. Peter warns that this judgment could happen and places responsibility on Simon Magus to respond actively. How does Simon respond?”<sup>21</sup>

Simon’s response is perhaps as difficult to discern as the depth of how he “believed” earlier: “And Simon answered, ‘Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me’” (v. 24). We should be cautious to draw too many conclusions from such a small statement.<sup>22</sup> The key point to see here, though, is that Simon does not deal with his sin and guilt—he only seeks to evade the punishment that Peter has warned. Polhill writes, “His response (v. 24) may express a degree of remorse but scarcely the sort of complete turnabout of will and mind that marks true repentance. In fact, Simon expressed no repentance. Instead, he asked the apostles to intercede for him. There was no prayer of contrition from Simon, just the fear that Peter’s predicted judgment might come down upon him.”<sup>23</sup> Bock adds, “If Simon were obedient, he would pray for himself and ask Peter to pray for him. Read in this light, his request to Peter is seen as dismissive. Peter can pray, but Simon will not. Perhaps the account concludes in an open-ended manner to allow the reader to ponder the proper response.”<sup>24</sup> While we are not the judges of Simon, this text invites us to judge our own hearts, lest we too remain in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity.

This passage concludes with a simple summary of the apostolic ministry in Samaria: “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” (v. 25). The move of the gospel into the villages suggests a deeper penetration of the gospel than being restricted to the cities only.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the gospel extends beyond Jerusalem and Judea, and into Samaria—and, not in the cities only, even leavening the smallest villages.

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<sup>19</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 414.

<sup>20</sup> “Moreover, there be two excellent fine metaphors in Peter’s words; the one whereof seemeth to be taken out of Moses, where he forbiddeth that there be not in us any root, from which springeth gall and wormwood, (Deuteronomy 29.) By which speech is noted the inward wickedness of the heart; when as it hath so conceived the poison of ungodliness, that being therewith infected, it can bring forth nothing but bitterness. To the same end tendeth the binding of iniquity: to wit, when the whole heart is kept bound and tied by Satan.” (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:346–47.)

<sup>21</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 334.

<sup>22</sup> While I disagree with Calvin’s attempt to read this as genuine repentance, there is much room for agreement with Calvin’s general word of caution: “The Scripture carrieth us no farther, save only unto a conjecture.” (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:347–48.)

<sup>23</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 220.

<sup>24</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 335–36.

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:348.

## Discussion Questions

1. Who is Simon (v. 9a)? What made him so influential in Samaria? What did he say about himself (v. 9b)? What did others say about him (v. 10)? Why did the people pay attention to him (v. 11)? How did the preaching of Philip disrupt the notoriety that Simon had enjoyed (v. 12a)? What is the significance of stating that both men and women were baptized (v. 12b; cf. Acts 8:3)? What clues does Luke give us in v. 13 about the nature of Simon's faith?
2. How was the ministry of Philip (an evangelist; Acts 21:8) connected to the apostles (v. 14)? What was Philip's role in spreading the gospel to Samaria? What was the role of the apostles? Why had the Holy Spirit not fallen on the believers in Samaria (v. 16)? What does it mean that they had only been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus (v. 16)? What is the significance of the Samaritans' receiving the Holy Spirit here?
3. What does Simon want (vv. 18–19)? What does Peter say Simon deserves for this request (v. 20a)? How does this request convey a false understanding of God (v. 20b)? Why does Simon's heart "that is not right before God" exclude him from participation in the Holy Spirit (v. 21)? What does Simon need to do (v. 22)? What does Peter identify at the bottom of Simon's request (v. 23)? How do you evaluate Simon's response in v. 24?
4. What does this passage teach us about the difference between true, living, saving faith, and false, dead, and hypocritical faith? What outward blessings did Simon seek rather than the blessings promised in the gospel? What outward blessings tempt you away from the gospel of Jesus Christ? How have you sought to use the gospel of Christianity for your own purposes, rather than simply receiving Christ's forgiveness by faith?