

## **Acts 8**

### **Simon the Sorcerer**

Simon the Sorcerer, also called Simon Magus because magus is the Greek or Latin origin or our word for magician, has become so famous for his deed of trying to buy the ability to bestow miraculous powers that his name has been immortalized in English as simony, the crime of buying or selling a spiritual office for money, which has occurred on numerous occasions in the past 1900 years.

It is not strange that the gospel should come in contact with magicians. They were common in the first and second centuries. The emperor Tiberius kept a large number of magicians to advise him. Sergius Paulus, the governor of Cyprus in Acts 13 to whom Paul (when he was still called Saul) preached. That governor had as his chief advisor a magician named Elymas, who opposed Paul's message.

Some early Christian writers mention Simon. Justin Martyr, a second century writer (who was just called Justin before he died), related that this Simon had such power that he was worshipped as a god in Rome, complete with his own temple and statue. Jerome, a fourth century writer, attributes to Simon a great history of claiming to be God and that he was the one through whom all must be saved. Some writings from the second century say that Simon had repeated confrontations with Peter. The stories are on the outrageous side, and may not be true, but at least Peter always won. Some well respected second century writers have related a history of Simon's followers, who claimed that Simon was the Christ. They gave the early church fits with their strange teachings for several centuries until they died out.

Simon's magic may have just been good illusion, coupled with considerable dishonesty. We can't figure out how the illusionists of today do it, and they don't claim to be gods. On the other hand, Simon could have gotten his power from the other side. Satan was able to do miracles in those days, as evidenced by some of the stories in Acts. But, we have no way to know which Simon was: dishonest illusionist or servant of Satan. Either way, Simon's magic made him well known and able to have a considerable impact on the world of his time.

But as we look at this story in Acts 8, let's look behind the facade of magic and public acclaim. Instead, let's look at the person of Simon, his attitudes and his flaws. There are many people just like Simon in the world today. Maybe we can learn how to deal with such attitudes. People today don't have Simon's flair, but they certainly have his mind.

To set the stage, up until Acts 5, the church was enjoying "favor with all the people." But then, Stephen had his unfortunate run-in with the Council, and was stoned by an angry mob. So, we pick up with Philip, who left Jerusalem partly because of the persecution. He went to Samaria. We will see illustrated here the principle, "Those of ability appreciate ability."

(Acts 8:4-13)

Note on verse 4: This is how the early church did it. They didn't employ a thousand professional missionaries. They were spread by the economic and political forces of the time (just like people are still moved around today), and they talked to their new neighbors.

You already know how the story ends. Try to put that aside for the moment and think about the attitudes of the various characters to this point in the story.

First, put yourself in Philip's shoes. He was in Samaria, of all places: the home of the counterfeit Jew, the place good Jews would walk tens of miles around just to avoid. And now

poor Philip was in the middle of it. Surely he was a little uneasy. But, the preaching was going well. A responsive audience was found. "There was much rejoicing in that city." (v8)

Then, Simon responded. Surely Philip knew of Simon. He was a famous person. Imagine Philip's elation when Simon came to be baptized. Philip had ability, and, consequently, he appreciated ability. He surely saw Simon as a prize catch. Someone with Simon's ability surely would make for great things in the kingdom.

I have attributed a lot of thoughts to Philip for which we have no information. Whether Philip thought this way or not, I don't know. But isn't that the way we think? When someone who is successful in business responds, we rejoice over his soul, but we also think, "What an opportunity for the gospel!" When a public figure responds, of course his soul is worth no more than that of someone else (we must include that disclaimer in passing), but look at the possibilities!

We think that way. But we need to be especially watchful that our attention to that new convert's ability doesn't spoil the soup.

The people of Samaria certainly felt that way about Simon's conversion. Surely, many were baptized because Simon was. That still happens today.

But what about Simon? He knew he had ability. He had been drawing large crowds and was adored by many. But Philip had more. People with ability recognize ability. He knew he was outclassed. It was only sensible to surrender.

Don't you wish people of ability today would surrender to God that easily? Simon at least had the sense to know when he was beaten. How many people have come face to face with the gospel, known they were beaten, and just pretended it didn't matter? Why?

There is a lesson in this for us concerning how to reach people. People respond when they find the thing they find important to be better in the gospel.

Simon found better magic.

People turn to Mormonism because of its strong emphasis on family and financial security.

People turn to Pentecostalism for the excitement.

We need to present the gospel to appeal to what that lost should find important. Is it companionship? Security? Love? Peace? Truth? When people see that the gospel can provide more of what they crave than they have been able to obtain on their own, they respond. They only hide their heads in the sand when the confrontation is in an area that's not all that important to them.

For example, when someone who values his or her business skills finds that the gospel is all powerful in matters of truth, it doesn't really matter. The gospel is offering something that is not very high on the list of valuable assets. He or she will be impressed only with what is of value to that person. That's why Simon responded. We need to present the gospel such that it contrasts with what that person finds important.

But that is only the beginning. As we will see with Simon, after getting someone's attention, it is necessary to fill in the rest of the picture of the gospel. If the world view doesn't change, disaster results.

(Acts 8:14-19)

Philip had considerable powers. He could cast out demons and heal lame and paralyzed people. But, apparently, he did not have the ability to pass that ability to others. So, Peter and

John came down to do just that. Simon had been amazed at what Philip could do. Imagine what he thought of Peter and John!

The problem was, Simon's world view had not changed. He followed Philip as one magician follows another: to learn his secrets, to again be the best. The most important thing in his life, the thing that gave him self-worth, had failed to change.

There are a number of ways to respond when faced with superior ability. The majority response is to ignore it. At least Simon didn't do that. He believed (v13), and an inspired writer should be able to get that right. He believed that Jesus is the Son of God, the Christ. But his point of view in the rest of his thinking failed to change accordingly. He submitted in order to recapture what he found most important: being in control.

Many people are converted in the same way - for reasons other than magic, but with the same thought processes. People may find a cure to loneliness, but fail to change whatever else was wrong. Or an answer to guilt. Or a place to feel useful. Those are all good reasons. But, the rest of the thinking processes need to change with it.

Did we submit like Simon? Did we respond to tap the power of the gospel for the one thing we found important, and fail to submit to all of it?

In fact, Simon did not need to purchase the power to pass along power. He already had it. He just didn't recognize it. While he did not have the ability to pass along miraculous powers, he had the power to change lives with the gospel. He just failed to understand that those abilities were at least of equal value. Further, that being the era when God was handing out miraculous abilities rather often, Simon could well teach someone the gospel and that person might be entrusted with some miraculous ability because God saw a need for it at that time and place. The powers do not belong to the individuals – or those with healing powers would never die. They would just keep healing themselves. But, Simon still saw his former magical power, over which he had control, as the most important, and dismissed the power of the gospel itself.

How do I know if I am like Simon?

Have you ever noticed how people tend to duplicate their worldly abilities in the church? In most places, the person with the church checkbook is a bookkeeper or accountant by profession. Those who lead singing could probably do that before they became Christians. Those who could speak or teach probably could do that before they became Christians. That practice is just good management of resources and it is a good thing.

But, is that as far as it goes? Simon's point of view never changed. Magic was still his game. If I have not learned a new skill that I didn't have before becoming a Christian, and learned it because God said I could, not because I already knew I could, then I may not have changed my point of view, my value system, the things I hold most dear. If I read a promise of God and say, "That one just isn't me," then I'm a Simon.

Simon had ability, so he appreciated ability. But, he found that his point of view needed to change as well. He found that old habits die hard.

(Acts 8:20-24)

Whether Simon was sincere in his repentance is not stated explicitly. But, this is written as though he were sincere, and written decades after the fact so there would have been time to fix the narrative, so I'm going to assume he was.

Peter here shows us what a believer is to do when he goes seriously astray. Simon already was a believer (v13). He had already been baptized (v 13). Peter did not recommend

repeating that procedure because the first one didn't take. Peter told Simon to repent and pray. And Peter gives an interesting attitude for Simon to use in this prayer. It is not a self-assured attitude of "God will forgive." No, Peter says, "If possible, the intentions of your heart may be forgiven you." It did not appear to be a sure thing!

Simon was stunned so badly by this rebuff that he didn't know what to do. He was helpless when he found out he had gotten it all wrong.

Isn't that the position into which we put most new Christians? We'll strip away all that they thought was important, and leave nothing in its place.

We'll tell them they can't make the rounds of the bars any more, and deprive them of the only social life they have ever known. We fail to fill the gap. Why are we surprised when they go back to it?

We tell them that success in business is not the measure of a person, but rather love, joy, and peace, church and family. However, they were never very good at love, joy, or peace, and they have already destroyed their families, so we leave them with nothing.

Old habits come creeping back because we fail to fill the void. That's where those convenient excuses come from. We finally find a reason that our old ways were really OK in the first place.

The other day, I was cleaning off my desk, and I ran across some old letters of reference from some old employers. They were very nice. Surely they wrote the same things about lots of other people, but since I didn't have the letters about other people, these could make me feel special.

I'm fortunate that you all make me feel good about what I do here. But what if I were not the guy in the front? Would I get more positive strokes from my job, or from the church? How do you think it goes for the average Christian? Is there any wonder that most Christians spend considerably more effort on the job than in the church? Is it any wonder that, when there is a conflict between work and church, work wins?

Simon could have been OK if he didn't feel the need to go back to his ability that gave him so much pleasure, to his feeling of self-worth. Although Simon believed (v13), his heart wasn't right with God (v21). That is a scary thought.

Sometimes, when talented people become Christians, their ability blinds us to their needs, because we, too, have our values in the wrong order. We need to learn to rely on the promises of God rather than on the abilities with which we came.

It's not the fellow in the lion's den who has faith. The fellow in the lion's den has no choices. Either the lion is going to eat him, or God will rescue him. It does not depend on him at all. The person who needs faith is the person with ability, who could rely on those native abilities and look good doing it. Instead, we need to trust God's promise and give up control.

All of us have ability. Unfortunately, we are saddled with this old way of thinking that values one ability over another. Paul wrote about what a silly idea that was, that we may look different, but we are all of equal importance. No ability is worth more or less than of another. But, we look at someone else's ability in an area we value and think, "Now that person has ability. I have nothing."

But that's not true. We all have ability. Every accountable person has the ability to make choices. Every accountable person has the ability to understand the gospel. Every accountable person has the ability to do the will of God. If we did not have these abilities, we could not be subject to judgment, because we did not have the ability to comply. But we do have the ability - we just fail to use it. Those abilities are obvious. Here's one many people do not believe. Every

accountable person has the ability to spread the gospel. It's a promise from God. We just tend to think that either the assignment or the ability belongs to someone else.

Those of ability recognize ability - the ability of God to make my life work.

I can change like Simon and never really change my point of view, just include a few trinkets from the traveling religious side show. Or, I can use that precious commodity called faith and rely on the promises of God.

But therein lies the catch. You cannot rely on promises you don't know. It takes a changed point of view to turn loose of what I see as my strengths and search out those promises I have never tried.

Old habits die hard. The fellowship of believers should provide the environment to break them down. Knowing the love of God should motivate us to search out those promises. But if all else fails, remember Simon. Until that point of view changes, your heart is not right with God.

Simon is not a great example of conversion, but he is perhaps a very realistic one. He did some things right. He believed. He was baptized. And when he messed up seriously, Peter told him to repent and pray. I'd like to think he did that.