

Simon: The Sorcerer

Saints and Scoundrels – Part IV

Acts 8:9-24

Introduction

My three-year-old Charity, watched some of the movie *The Wizard of Oz* a few weeks ago. Her older sister and brothers made sure she did not see the really scary parts with the Wicked Witch of the West. The other morning, she announced to me that she was Dorothy and I was the Tin Man. So now, she is wearing around the house, and even to my office on one occasion, her older sister's red shoes! The only problem is that her three-year-old tongue is having a hard time saying "W's". She keeps calling *The Wizard of Oz*, "The Lizard of Oz"!

If you have seen that classic movie, you undoubtedly enjoyed the moment when Dorothy and the others are finally granted entrance into the great hall of the awe-inspiring lizard, or wizard. Fire and smoke billow from either side of a large screen where the wizard's face is projected as he speaks to Dorothy and the others in a menacingly powerful voice. Then, you may remember, Dorothy's dog, little Toto, goes over to a nearby booth and pulls back a curtain that reveals a rather small man, operating controls at a feverish pace. It is the wizard, whose image is simply being projected on the screen. Then, as he realizes he has been exposed as a fraud, he still carries on for a line or two, saying, "I am the great wizard."

The great wizard, who had the entire population of Oz under his sway, was a fraud.

This morning, I want to introduce you to another wizard – only this time, it is not make believe. This man is a real live wizard, or sorcerer, who had held

the people of Samaria under his magical sway for many years. And he is about to meet his match.

Simon – The Samaritan Sorcerer

Turn to Acts, chapter 8, where we are introduced to Simon, the sorcerer of Samaria. As you are turning, I want to warn you that this passage is not only very enlightening, but frightening as well. The warnings that emerge from Simon's story are to be taken very seriously.

Simon's practice

Let us begin with verses 4 through 9. This will set the stage for the dramatic series of encounters between the power of God's Spirit and the power of this Samaritan sorcerer.

Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. So there was much rejoicing in that city. Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great;

The word for “magic” refers to sorcery. There were men who practiced occult arts in order to impress people and gain a following. Their magic included conjuring demons, conversing with the dead, influencing the gods, providing charms for healing, divination, stargazing, psychic prophecies, and the like.

So, Simon was followed by people he dazzled with his occult powers.

Simon’s pronouncement

The fact that Simon wanted worship and adulation from the people, in addition to their money and praise is implied in the next verse. Look at verse 10.

and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, “This man is what is called the Great Power of God.”

According to church history, Simon was one of the founders of a heretical group known as the Gnostics. Among other things, besides denying the deity of Jesus Christ, they taught that there was a spark of the divine in every man. Jesus was no more divine than you are – you need to live up to your deity.

Does that sound familiar? There are a long list of false prophets and prophetesses today who encourage their following to recognize their own godhood. They teach that the answers are within you.

According to the Bible, the only consistent thing within any of us is a depraved nature. That is why you never need to give your child a lesson on selfishness, but you do have to teach them to share; you never have to teach them how to lie, but you do have to teach them to tell the truth.

Jesus Christ did not come into the world to save basically good people who needed to understand that their low self-image was clouding out their divinity. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, as I Timothy, chapter 1, verse 15 tells us. And, as we are told in Romans, chapter 5, verse 8, “. . . while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

My little three-year-old said to me the other day, “Daddy, I want you to come play in my room.”

I said, “Honey, I can’t right now. I’m sorry.”

She came over to the desk and put her arm in my arm and said, “Daddy, I love you . . . now come to my room.”

Where do girls learn how to do that? From their mothers, who say, “Honey I love you . . . now would you take out the trash?”!

I had better get back to the text! In verse 10, Simon was called, “the Great Power of God”. You need to understand that that phrase was a reference to Simon’s claim that he was God incarnate. That phrase “*ὁ μέγας ἐξουσίας τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος*” would be used later by orthodox theologians in reference to both the Son and the Holy Spirit.

One early church father, Justin Martyr, reported that Simon was indeed, claiming to be the Messiah.

Simon’s power

Isn’t it fascinating to think, at the same time the true Messiah was revealing His power in Jerusalem through His following the church, that in Samaria, the false Messiah was performing wonders and miracles and claiming to be the true expression of God’s power.

Make no mistake, wherever there is a true and bona fide work of God, there will be a Simon Magus nearby. And make no mistake, nowhere in this passage is his power denied. In fact, Simon had started a deep religious movement. He had somehow related his leadership and miracles to the religious ideas of the Samaritans.

Notice his hold on the people, as indicated in verse 11.

And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts.

His magic art was more than illusion; like the magicians in Pharaoh’s court during the time of Moses. The underworld was, and is, capable of performing demonic, other-worldly phenomena. And, because the people who followed him had a limited perspective, they bought it “hook, line, and sinker”.

I found the news article about Steve Fossett’s record setting hot air balloon trip interesting. He recently touched down in a rural village in India and evidently, created quite a stir. In fact, most of the people he flew over came to conclusion that his silver balloon was actually the floating temple of the Hindu god Hanuman. Since they could not explain the phenomena, never having seen air travel of any kind before, they worshiped the balloon, convinced it carried one of their gods.

You might say, “What primitive pagans!”

Oh? Well, in Tampa, Florida, recently, additional police have had to convene near a building just to handle the traffic and worshippers. It is claimed that an apparition of the Virgin Mary can be seen on the side of a commercial office building. People are flocking there with candles, holding prayer vigils, claiming healing and all sorts of spiritual experiences.

Satan will gladly use a shiny silver colored balloon in India or an interesting shape on the wall of a building in Florida to create false worship of something or someone other than the one true Lord and God, the resurrected, and soon coming King of Kings, whose name and only name is “φΙησουε Χριστουσ,” Jesus Christ.

Simon’s profession

Now notice verse 12.

But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike.

Now, follow the chronology in the verses. Notice that verse 9 tells us,

. . . Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city . . .

That is past tense! What caused their worship of Simon to stop? Verse 12 tells us. There is an incredible movement now, following the miracles and message of Philip.

Philip is telling them about Jesus Christ, the true incarnation of God. And the Holy Spirit is drawing hundreds of these listeners to true faith in Christ.

What is Simon going to do? He is losing his following! He is losing his gravy train! He is being outmaneuvered by this evangelist from Jerusalem! What is he going to do? Verse 13 tells us.

Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip;
...

(In other words, “If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.”),

. . . and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.

Simon – The Selfish Seeker

John Phillips wrote, “What Simon coveted was not the Master, but the miracles; not the Savior, but the signs.”

Simon wanted to retain contact with his former followers, as the text will reveal in a moment. And what he will really want is a way to get the power of the apostles for himself.

Look at verses 14 through 17 of Acts, chapter 8.

Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.

In our next discussion, I will thoroughly deal with this paragraph. It is one of the key passages used by the Charismatic movement to teach that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is an additional, or subsequent, experience to conversion; instead of, as I am teaching, a simultaneous part of conversion. This is an important passage to understand, so we will deal with it alone. Today, I want to retain our focus on Simon.

Simon’s offer

Now notice verses 18 and 19.

Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, saying, “Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”

In other words, Simon viewed Peter and John like he must have viewed Philip, as fellow magicians. Magicians often sold their tricks and incantations to each other. Simon thought Philip had some great tricks, but this Peter and John trick was the best. While the text does not tell us, these believers may have also experienced healing and other miraculous things.

Simon’s objective

Simon reeked with crass materialism. He had a lust for power and a desire to fulfill his own agenda. So, he asked if he could buy the Holy Spirit. “Say

Peter, I'd like to buy that Holy Spirit trick. That'll put me back in business. I just need the secret to your Holy Spirit abracadabra. Say, Peter and John, how much does God cost anyhow?"

Continue to verses 20 through 23.

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 no part or portion [inheritance] in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity."

Peter has already seen Ananias and Sapphira fall dead at his feet for seeking to buy prestige in the church. I honestly believe that Peter thinks Simon may very well breathe his last at this point, as well. He says, "Simon, the intention of your heart is wickedness."

John Phillips again writes,

Simon Magus was an unsaved man. His false profession could be replaced by genuine conversion. The essential prerequisite to regeneration is repentance and there had been no repentance in Simon Magus' life. So Peter preached repentance to a Satan-blinded, money loving, power-hungry sinner, whom everyone else had thought to be a believer. But Peter said he was in bondage to bitterness. He had deeply resented his loss of influence and power and was bitterly jealous of the evangelist and the apostles. He envied their power. His crafty mind had seen a way to recoup his own waning influence, if only he could get his hands on the power they had. He had hidden his secret rage and resentment, biding his time. He was Satan's tool and Satan's fool.

Simon's obstinance

Simon responds tragically, in verse 24.

But Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

Simon is saying, in effect, "I don't want the consequences you've mentioned, but I will not change my actions either; I will not repent."

Repent means, "to change your mind; to move from defending your sinful, hopeless state to admitting you are a sinner in need of a Savior".

Simon said, "Nu-uh, my heart stays the same. But, if you will, pray for me yourselves, so that nothing bad happens to me."

Application – Lessons From a First Century Hypocrite

Let us apply this text by learning a couple of lessons from this first century hypocrite, Simon.

It is possible to fool most of the saints some of the time, but never the Savior

1. First, it is possible to fool most of the saints some of the time, but never the Savior.

I cannot help but wonder if Philip or one of the other believers who had witnessed Simon's dramatic conversion and baptism, were not a little embarrassed! Simon had temporarily fooled them. Like many today, he was a member of the body, he had been baptized, and he could give the date of his altar call confession! But only Simon knew that he did not really know God, he only wanted to use God.

I have read of Ivan the Terrible and he was as bad as he sounds. He was Ivan IV and was the first Russian ruler to be crowned Tsar. He was known as "the Terrible" and earned the title. Even as a child, this pampered boy was known for throwing cats and dogs off the roof of the Kremlin for fun. (Cats I can understand, but not dogs!) He grew up treating people like he had treated animals. Ivan believed he was divinely chosen to rule Russia, so any of his acts, no matter how terrible, were acts of God. One act was torturing the citizens of a nearby city who were considering defecting to Lithuania. In five weeks he killed sixty thousand people. On March 18, 1584, Ivan died. Following the custom of the organized Russian church, it was declared he died a monk. His head was shaved in monk-like fashion and he was buried in a monk's robes. I guess they expected God would be fooled by the funeral proceedings and welcome Ivan home.¹

You cannot fool God with a long robe. He is not tricked by a necklace with a big cross attached. Someone wrote, "In the choir of life, it's easy to fake the words, but some day, each of us will have to sing a solo before God."

You can fool most of the saints most of the time, but you will never fool God.

It is possible to follow all of the rules most of the time, and not have a relationship with Christ

2. The second lesson we can learn from this first century hypocrite is that it is possible to follow all of the rules most of the time, and not have a relationship with Christ.

Simon went through all the religious motions. He was always in the front of the crowd. He was always volunteering to carry Peter's briefcase. Simon would have been the one to say, "Okay, everyone quiet down and listen to my friends Peter and John."

These passages, in fact, show how close a person can come to salvation and yet, still not be converted. Simon heard the gospel, saw the miracles, gave a profession of faith in Christ, was baptized and yet, he was never born again.

It is not until later that we discover it was all a mirage; it was smoke and mirrors. Simon was a man behind a religious curtain, feverishly working the controls. There was a spiritual face on the public screen and it looked good.

All the outward trappings were there! Simon was following the rules, but he had never been redeemed. Had it not been for Peter, who pulled back the curtain, Simon would have been not only a member, but probably a leader in the Samaritan church.

Is that happening today? Are there "Simons" on the church roles today? Do churches baptize "Simons" today? Yes. Part of the blame lies within the church itself. We busily sell God to the masses as the healer, the soother, the one to fix your family, to prop up your business, to inject you with happiness and slap you on the back. We say He is a grandfather, a coach, a mechanic, a financial partner, a buddy, and ultimately, a contractor who has created a nice place called heaven, where we will all go one day and finally get what we deserve. So, do not upset me with talk of holiness or judgement.

Let me read a recent newspaper article to you. The title of the article is, "*Hello is Banished in Favor of 'Heaveno'*". It reads,

In Kleberg County, TX, commissioners voted unanimously to make "heaveno" the official courthouse greeting as a "symbol of peace, friendship, and welcome" in this current "age

of anxiety." The salutation was prompted by Kingsville resident Leonso Canales, 56, who for the past three years has headed a campaign to reject the traditional greeting "hello" because it contains the word "hell." "I see 'hell' in hello," Canales said. The operator of the local flea market also noted, "It's disguised by the 'o', but once you see it, it will slap you in the face."

Then, how do you say, "Help"?

It is fascinating to hear, "Don't tell me about the negative side of things. I like to say heaven, but not hell. I like to believe in heaven, but not hell."

My *Biblical Archaeology Review* summed it up well as it reported in its "Tabloid Watch" some recent discoveries reported in supermarket tabloids. And, by the way, this is the current theology of America.

We have the Son to thank for a whole new set of commandments. On April 9, 1996, the Son informed us that the discovery of a second sensational set of ten commandments has stunned theologians and historians around the world. The old set was negative, "Thou shalt not . . .", but the new set is positive. It is said to have been found together with the original ten on a mountain in Saudi Arabia. Number 11 states, "Thou shalt discover everlasting life in the herbs that grow." (You don't need a Savior, you just need some alfalfa.) Number 16 is a classic that I think, portrays what is going on today. I do not mean to poke too much fun, as this is the commandment that really struck me as sad. I hear it preached from pulpits and I hear it followed as the latest incantation. Number 16 says, "Thou shalt use the power of prayer to heal thyself of all sicknesses."

The phrase "use the power," means to get close to God so you can get enough power from Him that He can fix and make your life more comfortable. That is Simon, who says, "Give me a power that will return me to prestige, position, popularity, and success, and will regain money and adulation for me. If God can do that, I want Him, but do not tell me about a cross to bear; about suffering; about spiritual discipline; do not mention sin or holiness or judgment."

In other words, just give me the God of love. And even then, just give me a little bit of Him; not too much, just a little of the loving God. Do not give me the God of Peter who judges righteously, but a little bit of the God who will just help me get through the day.

Let me read a poem that expresses this well.

*I would like to buy three dollars worth of
God, please,*

I would like to buy just a little of the Lord.

*Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my
sleep,*

*Not enough to take control of my life; I'll
keep*

Just enough to equal a cup of warm milk,

*Just enough to ease some of the pain from my
guilt.*

*I would like to buy three dollars worth of
God, please;*

I would like to find a love that's pocket-sized.

Not enough to make me love a lesser man.

*Not enough to change my heart; I can only
stand*

*Just enough to take to church when I have the
time,*

*Just enough to equal a snooze in the
sunshine.*

I want ecstasy, not transformation.

*I want the warmth of the womb, but not a new
birth.*

*I would like to purchase a pound of the
eternal*

In a paper sack guaranteed or money back.

*You see, I would like to buy three dollars
worth of God, please;*

I would like to hide some for a rainy day,

Not enough to require change in me,

Not enough to impose responsibility;

Just enough to make folks think I'm O.K.,

Just enough to get through another Sunday.

*I would like to buy three dollars worth of
God, please.*

How did you come to God, and why? Did you want to add Him to your bag of tricks for handling the difficult issues of life? Did you want His impressive

name added to your list of references? Or, did you come to Him as a sinner, exposing to Him your guilt and sin, believing Romans, chapter 3, verse 23, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". Have you thrown yourself upon His grace alone for salvation?

You are not born again by sinning less, and you do not purchase the Holy Spirit by gifts to the church, membership in the church, or baptism by the church. Peter says, "Forgiveness is free."

However, you do have to come to Him and admit you cannot pay for it! You must say, in effect, "Lord, here is my sinfulness for Your sinlessness; my wretchedness for Your righteousness; my guilt for Your grace; my helplessness for Your Holiness."

There is no more working at the controls; no more smoke and mirrors; no more facade! I love the way the hymn writer penned it:

*Just as I am, without one plea, but that Thy
blood was shed for me,*

*And that thou bidst me come to Thee, O Lamb
of God, I come, I come!*

I want to offer an invitation and perhaps it is to you. You may need to say, "I'm not a Christian. I've tried to live like one; I've tried to make others believe I was alright before God, but God knows my heart like He knew Simon's heart. I'm not really a child of God. If you were to ask me, 'How I know I am going to heaven,' my answer would include, 'Well, I'm doing the best I can . . .'"

My friend, no one goes to heaven because they try hard. It is when they give up trying and simply trust in the finished work of Christ that they go to heaven.

Perhaps you are hearing this today and you know you are not a believer and you have resisted the Holy Spirit. Yet, His voice is pounding in your heart today, saying, "Repent and receive the Lord Jesus as your own personal Savior."

I urge you to do so now.

*Just as I am, without one plea, but that Thy
blood was shed for me,*

*And that thou bidst me come to Thee, O Lamb
of God, I come, I come!*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/2/1997 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Malcolm Forbes and Jeff Bloch, They Went That-A-Way: How the Famous, the Infamous, and the Great Died.