

The Gospel Preached by Philip; Simon the Sorcerer

Acts 8:1-25

Acts 8:1-25: *“Now Saul consented to [Stephens’s] death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church that was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. ³ As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. ⁴ Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. ⁵ Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. ⁶ And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. ⁷ For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed, ⁸ and there was great joy in that city.*

⁹ *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, ¹⁰ to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is the great power of God.” ¹¹ And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time. ¹² But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. ¹³ Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs that were done. ¹⁴ Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, ¹⁵ who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶ For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.*

¹⁸ *And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, ¹⁹ saying, “Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” ²⁰ But Peter said to him, “Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! ²¹ You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. ²² Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³ For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.”*

²⁴ *Then Simon answered and said, “Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things that you have spoken may come upon me.” ²⁵ So when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans.”*

Background Notes

In Acts 7, Stephen's sermon was God's final testimony to Israel, but the message was rejected, and Stephen was murdered. On that very day, great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem (v1). Notice - the most zealous persecutor of the church was Saul of Tarsus. *"He made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison" (v3)*. But a change was about to take place in this man's life! The conversion of "Saul of Tarsus" to "Paul the apostle" is found in Acts 9.

As a result of the increased persecution, the Christians were scattered from Jerusalem. *"And they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."* The apostles probably remained in Jerusalem to encourage the believers who stayed in that city.

The persecution that scattered the Christians actually helped to carry out God's program of spreading the gospel! Remember what the Lord told His disciples before His ascension? *"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8)*. God used the persecution of the early Christians to accomplish His plan for spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. This line from the early Christian, Tertullian, has often been quoted: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

Acts 11:19-20: *"Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus."* At first, most of the scattered Jewish Christians shared the gospel only with Jewish people. However, there were some exceptions.

Philip took the gospel to the city of Samaria. The Samaritans were not full blood Jewish. They were descendants of the forced marriages between Jews and the foreigners who were brought in by the Assyrians, when the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered. In fact, the Jews despised the Samaritans and "had no dealings with them" (John 4:9). But Philip obeyed the command of the Lord and moved out from Jerusalem and Judea to bring the gospel to Samaria. This Philip was not the same man as "Philip the disciple." This was "Philip the evangelist," who was one of the first deacons (Acts 6). When Philip came to Samaria, miraculous signs backed up his ministry of preaching, and it was greatly blessed. Many Samaritans paid attention, and many of them became believers. *"But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized" (v12)*.

In Samaria Philip encountered a man named Simon, who was a sorcerer. Simon professed to become a believer and was baptized (v13). But did Simon become a *true* believer? This question brings us to our doctrinal point for this first half of Acts 8.

Doctrinal Points

1. The profession of Simon is typical of many preachers today.

Was Simon a true believer or was he falsely professing to believe? Some commentaries on the book of Acts say “yes,” and some say “no.” Verse 13 says that he believed and that he was baptized. So was Simon a real believer, but a “carnal” or worldly believer? Was he a true believer who was hung up with money and power?

It certainly seems that Peter addressed Simon as an unbeliever in verse 20: *“May your money perish with you.”* The word “perish” that is used here is the same word that’s used for “perish” in John 3:16. It means to be *destroyed*. Could that be said of a true believer? In addition, verse 21 says, *“You have neither part nor portion in this matter,”* and verse 23, *“You are bound by iniquity.”* In Simon’s prayer request (v24), there was no sign of repentance, and no desire to pray to the Lord himself. Simon’s only desire was that nothing bad would happen to him. So it appears that Simon the sorcerer was not a true believer, but a false “professor” of faith.

But what about the fact that he believed and was baptized (v13)? It’s important to realize that a person can believe with the *head*, but not with the *heart*. And when has baptism ever saved anyone? John 2:23-24 says, *“Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men.”* Those people “believed” - but clearly it was not a true commitment to Jesus. They were not saved.

Listen to James 2:19: *“You believe there is one God, you do well. Even the demons believe and tremble.”* Demons believe that Jesus is God, but demons are not saved. It is possible to *believe with the head*, but not *commit with the heart*. Many people who are not true believers have been baptized. So there is a very good possibility that Simon the sorcerer was not a true convert, but only a false “professor.”

Many people today are in that category - including some preachers! Think of some TV evangelists. They profess to be believers. They use the Bible. You can sometimes hear the gospel in their sermons. But their emphasis always seems to be on earthly prosperity, wealth, “signs,” and dollars. What is their bottom line? Are they true believers - or are they primarily interested in money or selfish power? Are they “false professors”? Only God knows. In any case, the profession of Simon is typical of many preachers today.

2. The conversion of the Samaritans is not typical of the process today.

The fact that the conversion of the Samaritans was not typical of the conversion *process* today doesn’t mean that the Samaritans were saved in a different way or by a different means than believers are today. There’s only one way of salvation – by personal faith in Jesus Christ who died on the cross for our sins. But notice the difference in the *process* of conversion in the case of the Samaritans.

Step 1, they believed (v12). Step 2, they were baptized (v12). But they still did not have the Holy Spirit (v16). They didn't receive the Holy Spirit until Peter and John came from Jerusalem and laid hands on them (v17).

This is not the typical "process" of conversion today. In fact, in Acts 10 when the gospel came to the Gentiles at the home of Cornelius, the household of Cornelius received the Holy Spirit **when they believed**, and *then* they were baptized.

We believe this is the typical process of conversion today. Ephesians 1:13 says, "...when you believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise." This verse indicates that believers today receive the Holy Spirit at the moment of conversion - at the moment of belief. Then after salvation, having already been sealed with the Holy Spirit, believers should follow the Lord's command and be baptized as a testimony to their faith in Jesus.

At this point, the logical question is "Why was the process of conversion different for the Samaritans?" Most likely it was different to ensure that no questions would be raised about the validity of their conversion, and that the Samaritan believers would be received and included in the same body of Christ as the Jewish believers. You can imagine that if Peter and John from the "mother church" in Jerusalem had not been part of the Samaritan experience, a "Samaritan denomination" might have started, and the schism between Jews and Samaritans would have continued. But God prevented this from happening by the sequence of events in the process of conversion of the Samaritans.

While the **means of salvation** is the same, the **process of conversion** of the Samaritans is not typical of the process today.

Practical Application

Don't think you can buy spiritual gifts or power.

Did you ever hear the word "simony"? "Simony" refers to the buying and selling of clerical "offices" in the church, or the purchase of special favor or power within the church. The word "simony" comes from Simon the sorcerer, who actually thought he could buy the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit with money. Can you believe it?

Yet there are people today who follow the same practice. They think that money is the bottom line for gaining salvation and for doing the work of the Lord. They think that spiritual gift and spiritual power can somehow be bought – but nothing could be further from the truth.

God gives spiritual gifts to individual believers according to His will. Spiritual power comes from walking with the Lord, and obeying His Word and His will. Don't ever think it's possible to buy spiritual gifts or power!