

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

## Opportunities and Threats in the Church

Acts 8:4–25

Let's turn together to Acts 8. Last week's passage was a tragedy. It's probably the lowest point in the book of Acts. The saintly Stephen has just been stoned to death. Afterwards Saul goes on a church-persecuting rampage. And Jewish Christians who believe in Messiah Jesus are being forced out of Jerusalem. It's a sad state of affairs for the church. And nobody's raising Stephen from the dead either. Instead they just buried him with mourning and lamentation. And then Saul goes crazy against the church. What happens next in this narrative?<sup>1</sup>

Several years ago I read about something similar in what's called the Boxer Rebellion in China. During that time, at the turn of the twentieth century, many Christian missionaries were killed or forced to leave China. And the missionaries were fearful because they left these fledgling Christian churches with thousands of Chinese Christians behind. And they fretted over them and what was going to happen to them. How were they going to survive without a Western missionary presence?

But when missionaries were let back into the country several years later, to their great surprise those churches of thousands in China had turned into churches of millions. And God did a mighty work in China in the midst of that affliction without the leadership of those missionaries.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, you should know about the Tiananmen Square Massacre that took place almost 36 years ago and caused the death of hundreds, possibly even thousands of freedom-loving Chinese people. The Chinese government won't talk about it or acknowledge it. But God used that massacre to bring about great revival in China. People in China started turning away from their repressive government and turning to Christ as a result of that great tragedy. Praise the Lord! Nobody could have seen that 36 years ago. But God did!

Now what's going to happen in Acts after the tragedy of Stephen's death?<sup>3</sup> Well, what transpires in the church in the following verses can be divided into two categories: 1) Opportunities and 2) Threats. We'll see both in this passage today. We'll see...

***Opportunities and Threats to the Church's Mission.***

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**Write this down as a first opportunity and a first threat.**

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<sup>1</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 416: "Opportunities for evangelistic work are not always the result of deliberate planning. They sometimes seem to be the result of accidental developments, or even the corollary of external pressure and persecution. Philip arrives in Samaria because there is a persecution in Jerusalem which forces him to leave the city. As important as strategizing and planning are, Christians need to take care lest they overlook opportunities for sharing their faith which present themselves or, rather, which God presents in his sovereignty."

<sup>2</sup> See the *Christianity Today* article by Daniel H. Bays entitled "From Foreign Mission to Chinese Church": <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-98/from-foreign-mission-to-chinese-church.html>. See also the TGC article by Brent Fulton entitled "China's Rise and the Church's Call": <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/china-east-rise-united-states-church-call/>.

<sup>3</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 212: "Beginning with Acts 8:4, the story of the church's witness in all Judea and in Samaria unfolds. It extends throughout the whole of chaps. 8–11. Philip and the apostles witnessed to the Samaritans (8:1–25), and Philip witnessed to an Ethiopian at the Judean border and in the coastal cities (8:26–40). Paul was converted in Damascus, to which the Christian witness had already extended (9:1–31). Peter witnessed in the cities along the coast and to a Gentile God-fearer in Caesarea (9:32–10:48). The church in Antioch, established by Hellenists, began reaching out to the Gentile population (11:19–30). By the end of chap. 11 all of 'Judea' in its broadest territorial sense of 'land of the Jews' had been evangelized. Not only territorially but also ethnically, all the barriers had been crossed; and the stage was set for Paul's extensive witness to the Greco-Roman world."

1) The opportunity is **evangelism** and the threat is **stagnation** (8:4–8)

Just by way of review, here's what was happening just before Stephen died. The church was growing. People were getting saved in Jerusalem. Faith in Christ was exploding in Jerusalem. A conservative estimate for the population of Jerusalem was something like 100,000 people at this time. And Luke tells us that 5,000 men alone had gotten saved in Jerusalem (**Acts 4:4**). That's 5% of the population right there, and that doesn't even include women and children who had gotten saved. Who knows at this point how many people in Jerusalem have gotten saved. But we do know that it was enough to make the religious leaders very nervous.

Here's the thing, though. The church had only scratched the surface of completing the mission that Jesus had given them. They hadn't even broken through the environs of Jerusalem, let alone the larger areas of Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.<sup>4</sup>

So what does God do? Well God uses a tragic event in the life of the church, the martyrdom of Stephen, to propel the church to accomplish its mission.<sup>5</sup> God used the death of this good man, Stephen, to ignite a revival that swept beyond the gates of Jerusalem.

We touched on this a little bit last week. Look at **verse 1**.

<sup>1</sup> And Saul approved of [Stephen's] execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea<sup>6</sup> and Samaria, except the apostles.

So now, look at **verse 4**.

<sup>4</sup> Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

Look at that. That's awesome! The Greek word for “preaching” here is εὐαγγελίζω (*euangelizō*).<sup>7</sup> Our English words “evangelism” and “evangelize” are derived from this word. The death of Stephen didn't stagnate or slow down the church in any way. It actually accelerated its growth through evangelism.

They didn't lie low until the heat died down. They didn't let the persecution of the church or the death of Stephen goad them into silence. No! As they were scattered, they preached. As they left Jerusalem, they spread the word, the gospel. Stephen didn't die in vain. His death was used by God to detonate a revival among those who were scattered.

**Here's the thing. God used the pain and suffering of his people to advance his greater purposes. Does God do that? Has God done that in your life? How many of you can say that God used pain and suffering in your life to bring about something great?**

**And here's my point in that. What's good for the goose is good for the gander. What's good for the goose is good for the geese. God also uses pain and suffering in the life of the collective church to advance his purposes and get the message out.**

God used the death of Stephen and that great tragedy to push the early church out of their comfort zone (i.e., Jerusalem). God used this persecution in Jerusalem to get the gospel out to Judea and Samaria, in order to advance Christ's mission. Let me put this way—God does not want the individual or the church to stagnate. And he allows suffering in the life of his people, those whom he loves and cherishes as the apple of his eye, to grow them and mature them and make them obedient to his purposes.

Now watch this. Look at **verse 5**.

<sup>4</sup> Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. <sup>5</sup> Philip went down to<sup>8</sup> the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.

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<sup>4</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 398 argues that this “should not be interpreted as disobedience on the part of the apostles, who had been commissioned by Jesus to go from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (1:8).” I'm not so sure.

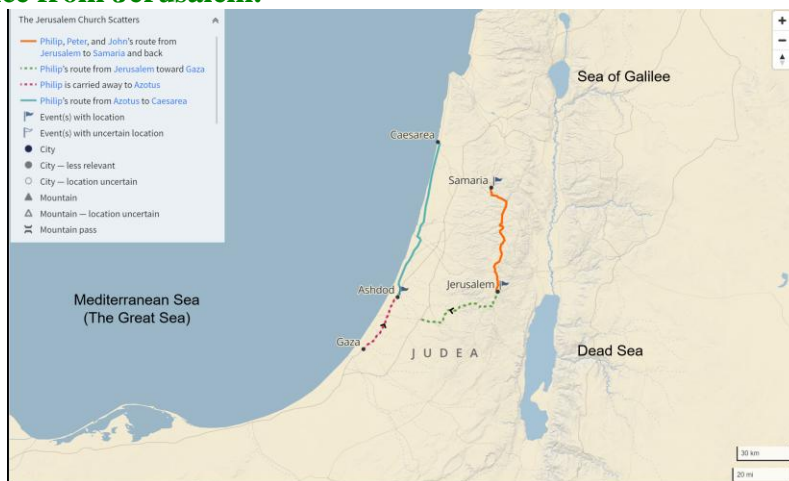
<sup>5</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 320: “Ironically, it is persecution that helps the church carry out the commission Jesus gave them (Acts 1:8; Matt. 28:18–20)... Faithfully, the persecuted church disperses and preaches the word of the gospel.”

<sup>6</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 398 assumes that there has already been ministry in Judea in light of Acts 5:16. But I'm more inclined to see that as the environs of Jerusalem. Broader Judea isn't addressed specifically until Acts 8.

<sup>7</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 336: “The verb εὐαγγελίζω (*euangelizō*, preach the gospel) is also frequent in Luke-Acts (fifteen times in Acts: 5:42; 8:4, 12, 25, 35, 40; 10:36; 11:20; 13:32; 14:7, 15, 21; 15:35; 16:10; 17:18; ten times in Luke; twenty-nine more times in the rest of the NT).”

<sup>8</sup> Vickers, “Acts” in *John-Acts*, ESVEC, 407: “The direction ‘down to’ (8:5) is fairly common regardless of the direction people travel from Jerusalem, as it refers to the city's higher elevation rather than to a direction on a map.”

Two questions for **verse 5**: who's Philip and where's Samaria? Samaria was a region north of Jerusalem. The city of Samaria was probably the ancient city of Shechem.<sup>9</sup> It was roughly 30 miles north of Jerusalem.<sup>10</sup> **Now 30 miles is nothing for us in our day. That's a trip across town. But in the first-century world, this was a significant distance from Jerusalem.**



**The Jerusalem Church Scatters<sup>11</sup>**

Samaria was a region that encapsulated a lot of villages. Jesus visited one of those villages in **John 4**, when he encountered the Samaritan woman. But as you can see, Samaria had a very strategic location between Galilee, where Jesus grew up, and Jerusalem. So there was a lot of movement in this area among the Jews. Christ said he wanted his gospel spread to Jerusalem Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (**Acts 1:8**). And you can see on this map, that Jesus was thinking in concentric circles growing from Jerusalem to the broader region of Judea to the northern region of Samaria and then worldwide.

Now as for Philip, this guy who went to Samaria, he was one of “the seven” in **Acts 6**, who, like Stephen, was appointed by the apostles for distributing benevolence among the widows.<sup>12</sup> According to **Acts 6:3**, he was a man “full of the Holy Spirit.” So Philip is no slouch. He’s full of “Holy Spirit power” in his life.

**One of the things that you should have noticed already from our study of Acts is the need to be “full of the Holy Spirit.” If you don’t have the Holy Spirit’s power coursing through your veins and overflowing in your life, you are not going to serve the Lord powerfully. God doesn’t want his work done in the flesh. He wants his work done in his power, as we labor full of the Holy Spirit.**

<sup>9</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 325: “The Samaritan city is unknown, but its identity is not important in Luke. That Samaria is the location is all Luke wishes to note. Justin Martyr (*1 Apol.* 26.2) suggests Gitta, home of Simon Magus. Bruce (1990: 216) suggests Shechem, a key city, or the ancient Nablus as potential locales (as does Pesch 1986a: 272; Shechem is the religious center of Samaria). It could be Sebaste, named by Herod the Great in honor of Augustus but also known as Samaria (Barrett 1994: 402, apparently; Schille 1984: 201 thinks it is the only option). Against this choice is that Sebaste was strongly Gentile and not a Samaritan religious center. Simon’s presence as a magician, however, might be evidence in its favor. Hengel and Schwemer (1997: 80–81) opt for the Samaritan capital, Sychar (i.e., in the environs of Shechem), along with Ashdod and Caesarea on the premise that this is where Philip is active later. In the end, we cannot make a clear identification of the exact locale, although Shechem is the best candidate.”

<sup>10</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 404–5: “The distance from Jerusalem to Shechem at the foot of Mount Gerizim is only 60 kilometers (37 miles) and could thus be reached in two or three days. According to John 4:19–26, 39–42, Jesus had sympathizers in Samaria. In local synagogues Philip could have encountered disciples of John the Baptist who had baptized in the border region of Samaria. If the congregation in Jerusalem maintained regular contacts with Jesus’ supporters in Galilee, believers would have regularly traveled through Samaria. Thus there were several points of contact that would have helped Philip in his preaching activities. At the same time we should not forget that Jesus and his disciples had not only positive experiences in Samaria; on one occasion a Samaritan town refused to provide Jesus and his disciples with hospitality (Luke 9:52–56).”

<sup>11</sup> Atlas taken from Logos Bible Study, Computer software. *Logos Bible Study Atlas* (Bellingham: Faithlife, LLC), May 3, 2025. Some geographical points added by author (e.g., Sea of Galilee).

<sup>12</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 186: “This is not the Apostle Philip of Mark 3:18, but Philip the deacon. He now becomes Philip the evangelist, and he is actually referred to that way in Acts 21:8.”

**Now Stephen was a man full of the Holy Spirit. And they killed him. And you'd think that that would be a devastating thing for the church. But God is like, "next man up!" "Stephen, you're out. Come home to me. Your work is done. Philip, you're in. Go get it done."**

**Here's something you need to know—no servant of God is indispensable. No preacher, no apostle, no pastor, no elder is indispensable for God's work. It's next man up until Christ returns. The Holy Spirit is the only one who's indispensable for the work of the church. If you don't have him, you've got nothing, no matter what you have. If you have him you have everything, regardless of what you lack.**

And so Philip, "full of the Spirit" comes to town, in Samaria, to preach the gospel. Look at verse 6.

<sup>6</sup> And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip when they heard him and saw the signs that he did.

<sup>7</sup> For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed.<sup>13</sup>

Philip was able to do the kinds of miracles that the apostles were doing in Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup> Once again God has endowed Philip with the unique ability to heal and exorcise demons in order to authenticate the message and spread the gospel more quickly.<sup>15</sup> Does God always do this? No! But he does it here.

Other than Christ's encounter with the Samaritan women in **John 4**, there was little gospel witness in this community. And God wanted to spread this message quickly. And so he gave Philip unusually powerful, supernatural, spiritual gifts.<sup>16</sup>

Now here's the thing about the Samaritans. You need to know this. The Samaritans hated the Jews.<sup>17</sup> And the feeling was mutual.<sup>18</sup> The Samaritans were historically part of the northern kingdom of Israel.<sup>19</sup> But after the Assyrian invasion in 722 BC, King Sargon II sent non-Jewish people to settle in Samaria and intermarry with the Jews (see **2 Kings 17:24–40**).<sup>20</sup> So Samaritans weren't full-blooded Jews.<sup>21</sup> They were viewed by the Jews as half-breeds.<sup>22</sup> **It was said in this day that to eat with a Samaritan was like eating pork, a detestable thing in the mind of a Jew.**<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 188: "A clear distinction is made between demonic problems and physical ailments."

<sup>14</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 215: "Ultimately, it was the gospel they responded to, not the miracles (v. 12). Miracles can assist faith but never can be a substitute for it. When the miraculous assumes priority, it can actually become a hindrance to faith."

<sup>15</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 326: "Miracles, for Luke, draw people into considering the message. Philip's actions recall the ministries of Jesus and Peter (Luke 7:22–23: signs of the arrival of the age)."

<sup>16</sup> Vickers, "Acts" in *John–Acts*, ESVEC, 407: "Elsewhere in the Gospels, the Samaritans play a fairly regular, if unexpected, role. The parable of the good Samaritan shows what it means to be a neighbor after a priest and a Levite pass by a half-dead man on the road to Jericho but a Samaritan does not (Luke 10). When Jesus heals ten lepers on his way to Jerusalem, only one returns to thank him, and he is a Samaritan (Luke 17:15–16). In John 4 Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well, teaching her about the gift of the Spirit and calling her out on her adultery. Despite all the times Jesus refuses to be identified as the Messiah (or at least with popular ideas of what that means), or gives vague responses when asked about it, he straightforwardly tells this Samaritan woman that he is the Messiah (John 4:26)."

<sup>17</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 405: "In AD 6/7 the Samaritans provoked the Jews when they scattered bones in the temple in Jerusalem during Passover."

<sup>18</sup> Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 13, Kindle: "A popular prayer in those days said, ' . . . and, Lord, do not remember the Samaritans in the resurrection.'"

<sup>19</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 405: "In the Old Testament, the term 'Samaria' mostly refers to the capital city of the northern Israelite kingdom built by king Omri (1 Kgs 16:21–28)."

<sup>20</sup> Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 13, Kindle: "In 587 B.C. the people of the southern kingdom, Judah, were taken captive into Babylon. But in Babylon there was no intermarriage. So when those Jews came back to their homes, they were of unadulterated Jewish blood, unlike the inhabitants of the northern kingdom."

<sup>21</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 405n1872: "According to the inscription of Sargon II, only 27,290 Israelites were deported (*ANET*, 284–85), which makes it possible that a sizable part of the Israelite population remained in Samaria and the region controlled by the city."

<sup>22</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 324: "Popular among the Jews, as they were despised for being unfaithful and of mixed ancestry, and they were treated as defecting half-breeds."

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*.



Additionally over time the Samaritans developed their own religious system apart from the Jews. They erected their own temple, which the Jews destroyed.<sup>24</sup> They had their own traditions that differed from the Jews. They worshipped on different mountains, which was confusing for the Samaritan woman in **John 4**.<sup>25</sup>

In the **Gospel of Luke**, Luke records this amazing exchange between Jesus and his apostles. **Luke 9:51–55** states, “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, ‘Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?’” But he turned and rebuked them.”

The Jews and the Samaritans hated each other. And so this picture of Philip, in **Acts 8**, when he comes waltzing into Samaria and starts preaching Christ and doing miracles is, quite frankly, remarkable. And these Samaritans get saved. Christ’s mission is getting accomplished.

By the way, Philip and the rest of the church had plenty of reasons to hunker down and keep quiet with their message. Here’s what human wisdom would say, **“Hey Philip, Philip buddy, don’t make waves right now. Just lie low for a while and let the heat die down a bit. Let’s just consolidate our gains. Let’s bask in our successes for a while. And let’s hold off on any new gospel ventures.”**

I can see even well-meaning people in Jerusalem saying, **“Stephen went too far. He said too much. He was too bold. And now we’re getting persecuted. And now we’ve got to leave Jerusalem and live like exiles in places we hate, like Samaria. If only he would have said a little less. If only he would’ve been less aggressive.”** That’s not God’s interpretation of the story. That’s not how God judges Stephen’s actions.

The truth is, after Stephen’s death, Philip and the rest of the early church had plenty of reasons, humanly speaking, to forgo Christ’s mission and lie low for a while. Also they had social reasons to ignore the spiritual needs of their hated neighbors, the Samaritans.

But instead of stagnation, what we have here is proliferation. Instead of cold, stale, weak, ineffectual Christianity, we have vibrant, joyous, obedient, Spirit-filled, Christ-exalting Christianity. And here’s the end product. Here’s what happens in Samaria thanks to Philip’s witness. Look at **verse 8**.

<sup>8</sup> So there was much joy<sup>26</sup> in that city.<sup>27</sup>

**Do you remember when you first came to Christ? Was that a joyful experience for you? Do you remember when you first heard and received the good news? What about when you first heard that “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8)? Was that a wonderful moment in your life? Was there jubilation when you first believed? The only thing that compares with the deep joy that we experience in our own salvation is when God uses us to bring those things about in another person’s life. I love those experiences.**

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<sup>24</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 214–5: “From a Jewish perspective the Samaritans were a sort of *tertium quid*, neither Jew nor Gentile. They were descended from the northern tribes of Israel, the old kingdom of “Israel” that had fallen to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Those who were not taken captive to Assyria but remained in the land intermarried extensively with the native Canaanite population and the peoples whom the Assyrians resettled in the conquered territory. These Samaritan descendants of the old northern tribes considered themselves still to be the people of God. They had their own form of the Pentateuch for their holy Scriptures, circumcised their sons, and built a temple on Mt. Gerazim to rival the one in Jerusalem (cf. John 4:20). The Hasmonean king John Hyrcanus (135–104 B.C.) destroyed their temple and made them subservient to the Jews. Later liberated by the Romans from Jewish domination, they continued to worship God in their own independent manner and to look for the *taheb*, a prophetlike messiah who would restore the true worship on Gerazim, a messianic expectation based on Deut 18:15 (cf. John 4:25). The Jewish prejudice against the Samaritans is well-known. To the Jews the Samaritans were half-breeds and heretics. Philip’s venture into a Samaritan mission was a radical step toward Stephen’s vision of a gospel free of nationalistic prejudices.”

<sup>25</sup> Mount Gerizim for the Samaritans in Samaria versus Mount Zion (Jerusalem) for the Jews.

<sup>26</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 326: “Luke’s Gospel often mentions joy, but this is its first mention in Acts (Luke 1:14; 2:10; 8:13; 10:17; 15:7, 10; 24:41, 52–53; Acts 8:7–8; 12:13–14; 13:51–52; 15:3).”

<sup>27</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 407: “Even though the joy (v. 8) of the Samaritans is separated from their faith (v. 12) in terms of literary construction, joy and faith belong together as the ‘experience of gladness’ is a fundamental characteristic of people who have repented of their sins and who come to faith in Jesus as Messiah and Savior.”

**When the church gets attacked by Satan and his minions, there are opportunities and there are threats. The threat is stagnation. The opportunity is evangelism.**

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**Here's a second opportunity and a second threat to the church's mission. Write this down as #2.**

2) The opportunity is **new life** and the threat is **old habits** (8:9–13)

**Have you ever heard this expression? Finish this if you know it—"Old habits die ... hard!"** Is that a true statement? Yes it is, and we'll see evidence of that in the text.

**Look at verse 9.**

<sup>9</sup> But there was a man named Simon,<sup>28</sup> who had previously practiced magic<sup>29</sup> in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>10</sup> They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great."

**Now let me let you in on a little secret. When people don't know Jesus, they look for weak substitutes. When people don't know the power of God, they call "Great," that which is not so great. And that's what's happening here.**<sup>31</sup> **Look at verse 11.**

<sup>11</sup> And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic.

Now "magic" is a broad term in Greek.<sup>32</sup> It's broader than the way we would use it in English.<sup>33</sup> The magi, for example, in the **Gospel of Matthew** were "magicians" of a sort (i.e., "the wise men" who came to see Jesus in **Matt 2:1–12**). And the term "magic" was used for "scholarly men" like them, as well as for what we would call magic in our own day—the hocus pocus kind of stuff.<sup>34</sup> Some of the magic in the first-century world was parlor tricks and "sleight of hand." And some of it was downright demonic. All of that was put under the umbrella of what people in Luke's day called "magic."

Now I don't know what Simon's "magic" was. **Was Simon a spiritist? Or was he Harry Houdini?** I'm inclined to think he was just an illusionist with some clever parlor tricks.<sup>35</sup> I think "sorcerer" is probably too strong a description of him. Maybe he was accessing demonic power with his "magic." Maybe he wasn't. But there's obviously something demonic going on with Simon because he was going around saying, **"I am great. I am great."** He let people say that he had the power of God, which we know, he didn't.

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<sup>28</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 188: "Simon is a Hebrew name, but this was not unusual, because most, if not all Samaritans had Hebrew names. The Samaritans spoke, and still do speak, a form of ancient Hebrew."

<sup>29</sup> Vickers, "Acts" in *John–Acts*, ESVEC, 407: "Magic, sorcery, divination, and the like are roundly condemned in both the OT and the NT (Lev. 19:26, 31; Deut. 18:10; Mal. 3:5; Rev. 21:8; 22:15). In many parts of the world, such manipulation of evil powers to achieve some desired benefit for oneself or others or to wreak havoc in another's life is commonplace and is often a serious threat."

<sup>30</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 327: "Simon calls himself great, drawing attention to himself and his own work... This stands in contrast to Philip, who points to Jesus as the Christ, not to himself."

<sup>31</sup> Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 13, Kindle: "How different he was from the truly great servants of God. As Paul said to the Corinthians: When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. (1 Corinthians 2:1-3)"

<sup>32</sup> The Greek noun *μαγεία* (*mageia*) occurs only here (Acts 8:11) in the NT. The Greek verb *μαγεύω* (*mageuō*) occurs only in Acts 8:9. The cognate term *μάγος* is used of Elymas Bar-Jesus in Acts 13:6, 8 and also of the wise men in Matthew's infancy narrative (Matt 2:1, 7, 16).

<sup>33</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 407: "In the ancient world, magic—what today we would call witchcraft, sorcery, or the occult—was based on the view that human beings, gods, demons, and the visible world are all interconnected by sympathies and antipathies in ways which can be influenced by rituals which involve incantations and the manipulation of and with objects. The purpose of magic is to overcome public or private problems. Usually magic is defensive, harnessing the powers of gods or spirits in order to gain protection against diseases and the demons of diseases. Active forms of magic seek victory in a race or success in sexual liaisons; the offensive use of magic against personal enemies, involving curses, was feared and often punished."

<sup>34</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 215n104: "The terminology of *μάγος/μαγεία* is ambiguous in Hellenistic Greek. Originally meaning a Persian priest, it could be used in a quite positive sense, as it is of the magi-astrologers of Matt 2. It was also used in a pejorative sense of a mere trickster, as seems to be the case with Simon and Elymas (13:6) in Acts."

<sup>35</sup> Sproul, *Acts*, 143: "Simon Magus was a magician. He was a phony. He had no supernatural power, and he knew it. Then he saw the real thing, the miracles performed by Philip."

But watch this. Something fantastic happens here. Simon, this huckster... this person people called “great” who in my mind is just a trickster, wanabee sorcerer ... gets saved! Along with a group of Samaritans, Philip preaches him and shazam! ... something really powerful happens.<sup>36</sup>

Look at **verse 12**.

<sup>12</sup> But when [the Samaritans] believed Philip as he preached good news

This is the real power of God! This is the real power in this world!

<sup>12</sup> But when [the Samaritans] believed<sup>37</sup> Philip as he preached good news [εὐαγγελίζω] about the kingdom of God<sup>38</sup> and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Even Simon himself believed,

Do magicians get saved? Do prideful people come to faith in Christ? Do enemies of Christ become his friends? Absolutely! This is great.

The gospel was preached. The name of Jesus was believed. Philip was doing his evangelistic best, and people got saved. And then people got baptized. It’s like Pentecost all over again.<sup>40</sup>

And you might think that Simon, after Philip starts encroaching on his turf in Samaria, would oppose Philip. **“Vile fiend. How dare you come to my territory! This is my land. These are my subjects. Take your gospel back to Jerusalem where you belong! You and your Jewish gospel. We don’t want you here.”** Wouldn’t you expect that from Simon?

That’s not what happens. This shows how the power of God on display in Samaria.

<sup>13</sup> Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip.

He’s part of Philip’s entourage now. He’s a disciple.<sup>41</sup>

And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.<sup>42</sup>

**We’ve seen already the threat of “old habits” that die hard, and we’re going to see in just a minute how those old habits can still surface even after a person gets saved. But notwithstanding the threat of “old habits,” there is a wonderful opportunity available to the church among the unchurched people of this world and it’s this: new life. You preach the gospel. People get saved. New life!**

**Sometimes you preach the gospel and people get radically saved like at Pentecost. That’s what we see here with these Samaritans. And sometimes you preach the gospel like Stephen did to the religious leaders and they reject you and hate you for it. The salvation of a person’s soul is ultimately outside of our hands. Our job is not to save people. Our job is to preach good news.**

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<sup>36</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 417: “Philip had no qualms about contacts with Simon, who was a recognized and probably feared expert in the arts of the occult. Missionaries who worked on the island of Java in Indonesia report encounters with witch doctors who challenged them to a duel of spiritual powers, killing chickens on the other side of the street with a curse as preparation for the real showdown and a demonstration of what they were capable of. Even in such extreme circumstances, where one’s life might be in danger, followers of Jesus do not have to be afraid of the supernatural powers that sorcerers may be able to conjure up, since the power of the one true God is greater than the power of any spirit, curse, or spell. At the same time we should note that Luke’s narrative shows no fascination with magic or with magic practices.”

<sup>37</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 328: “Here ἐπίστευσαν (*episteusan*) is aorist and refers to the moment of faith that leads each one into the community. It contrasts with the imperfect tense for ‘taking heed,’ which means that they listen for a while and then respond. This response leads immediately to baptism (ἐβαπτίζοντο, *ebaptizonto*), also probably an ingressive imperfect verb to suggest that people are beginning to be baptized when they respond.”

<sup>38</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 216–7: “The content of the preaching is variously described in this passage. In v. 4 it is ‘the word’; in v. 5, ‘the Christ’; and in v. 12, ‘the kingdom of God’ and ‘the name of Jesus Christ.’ All refer to the same reality, the salvation that is in no other name (4:12).”

<sup>39</sup> Some have suggested that the Samaritans were not truly converted at this moment, but only later when Peter and John came and they were filled with the Spirit. Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 409 gives four cogent responses to refute this view.

<sup>40</sup> Some have even referred to this event in Acts 8 as the “Samaritan Pentecost.”

<sup>41</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 409: “The present tense of the participles translated as ‘he attached himself’ (προσκαρτερῶν) [ESV: ‘he continued’] and ‘he saw’ (θεωρῶν) [ESV: ‘seeing’], having semantic prominence, imply that Simon’s conversion had ongoing consequences for his behavior in initial discipleship, again indicating that there is no reason to doubt the genuine nature of his faith commitment. There is no trace of any suggestion that Philip baptized Simon prematurely.”

<sup>42</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 329: “Simon is amazed (ἐξίστατο, *existato*; the imperfect points to an ongoing amazement). This verb also appeared in verse 11 to describe how the crowds react to Simon).

**I've said this before, but let me say it again. If a church doesn't evangelize, it'll fossilize. If a church doesn't get excited about new life and fresh salvations in the body of Christ it'll die a slow death. You can always tell when a church is dead spiritually. It's when someone gets saved and everyone in the church acts like, "Whoop-de-do! Who cares?" Now they might not say that exactly, but you can feel that in a church that's dead.**

**But we all know that there is this great joy that comes from new life in Christ. A healthy church is going to have new babies in the nursery and baby believers in the fellowship. That's the opportunity before us if we're willing to take advantage of it.**

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**Here's a third opportunity and a third threat to the church's mission. Write this down as #3.**

3) The opportunity is **spiritual instruction** and the threat is **sinful ignorance** (8:14-25)

Now watch what happens next. Whenever you have new life in the church, you typically have bad habits that carry over into that church from those new believers. Nobody gets saved and then automatically turns into a super Christian. That just doesn't happen. Salvation is the start of the sanctification process that God wants to do in the life of a believer. And we're going to see that here with Simon, this baby-Christian, who still has some bad habits.

Look at **verse 14**.

<sup>14</sup> Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John,<sup>43</sup>

By the way, this is the last time that the Apostle John is mentioned as a character in the book of Acts. So prepare to say goodbye to John.<sup>44</sup> He shows up again in the NT in **1-3 John** and **Revelation**.

Luke says that Peter and John...

<sup>15</sup> ... came down and prayed for [the Samaritans] that they might receive the Holy Spirit, <sup>16</sup> for [the Holy Spirit] had not yet fallen on any of them,<sup>45</sup> but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Then [Peter and John] laid their hands on [the Samaritans] and [the Samaritans] received the Holy Spirit.<sup>47</sup>

Now this is a highly debated passage in Christendom today. So let me just take a moment, before we deal with Simon, to explain what I think is going on here. I don't want the main points of this passage to get sidetracked with this, but this is such an important issue that I think it deserves our attention.

The issue here is this receiving of the Holy Spirit. Why didn't the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit when they got saved? Does the indwelling of the Holy Spirit occur at a time other than salvation?<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 192: "This was to be a personal lesson for [John], because he and his brother James had wanted the Samaritans destroyed (Lk. 9:54). Now, there had to be a change of heart on John's part as he went down to Samaria with Peter in order to authenticate the Samaritans' salvation."

<sup>44</sup> Luke does mention him as James's brother in Acts 12:2.

<sup>45</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 410: "The fact that Peter and John pray for the reception of the Holy Spirit rather than explain the gospel in more detail confirms that they accept the faith of the Samaritans as authentic. Luke marks the delay of the reception of the Holy Spirit in v. 16 as extraordinary, stating that the Spirit had 'not yet' (οὐδέπω) come upon any of them (ἐπ' οὐδενὶ αὐτῶν). This explanation would be superfluous if Luke or his readers regarded an interval between baptism and the reception of the Spirit as normal."

<sup>46</sup> Vickers, "Acts" in *John-Acts*, ESVEC, 408: "The Samaritans believed and were baptized yet did not receive the Spirit. Luke offers no explanation but tells the story as though nothing is strange about this occurrence."

<sup>47</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 331-2: "Baptism with a later coming of the Spirit is exceptional and not normative... This special dispensing of the Spirit comes as a new region or recognized group receives the gospel (Samaria here; Gentiles in Acts 10; John's disciples in Acts 19)... There is no set pattern to dispensing the Spirit in Acts. At various junctures God acts in different ways for different purposes. The reason for the delay here may well be to make clear to the apostles, as the witnesses, that God has acted. The one constant in the first three bestowals of the Spirit is the presence of an apostle (on the importance of the Spirit, see Acts 10:44-48; 11:15-17). Normally the Spirit comes with faith in the NT (Acts 2:38; 1 Cor. 12:3, 13), but these are special circumstances that make a break in the pattern to underscore a fresh move of God ... Jervell (1998: 264) speaks correctly of a 'special legitimization' taking place here because of the potential controversy of Samaritan inclusion. The Spirit is described as a gift in 2:38; 10:45; and 11:17 as well as by Peter in verse 20. The description here makes clear that the coming of the Spirit is God's work."

<sup>48</sup> Vickers, "Acts" in *John-Acts*, ESVEC, 408: "Luke presents a descriptive event that is not meant to imply a pattern or prescribe a continual practice. The provisional nature of Acts, particularly its early chapters, cannot be set aside. We must look for patterns but also acknowledge when those patterns change. Furthermore, the emphasis we put on order and sequence is not always an issue in Acts. Salvation's components, not its exact order, is the issue. In Acts, the general pattern is that believers receive the Spirit and are baptized."



Here's how I make sense of this issue. There are instances in the Bible where the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is concurrent, meaning it happens simultaneously, with salvation. When a person is born again, they are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. This is what we call regeneration. And regeneration is indistinguishable from justification. In other words, justification, salvation, regeneration, born again, indwelt with the Spirit... these terms are interchangeable and coextensive in the life of a believer.<sup>49</sup>

The best text for this understanding is **Ephesians 1:13–14**. Paul says there, “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory” (1:13–14). Paul would also tell the church in Rome in **Romans 8:9**, “You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.” So at least by the time that Paul would write **Romans**, he believed that belief in Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit were coextensive. You couldn't have one without the other.<sup>50</sup>

Now historically we have three instances where belief in Christ preceded a separate and later receiving of the Holy Spirit. The first instance of this is Pentecost in **Acts 2**.<sup>51</sup> And that's easy to explain because the Holy Spirit was initially poured out at Pentecost. He indwelt believers for the first time. A second example is here in **Acts 8** with these Samaritans. And then the third occurrence is with Cornelius and his Gentile family in **Acts 10**.<sup>52</sup>

So the question is this. We have Biblical examples of the Holy Spirit indwelling a believer at salvation—**Ephesians 1:13**; **Romans 8:9**; see also **1 Corinthians 12:13** and even other places in **Acts** where they seem to take place at the same time. And we have these other examples where faith in Christ is followed later by the receiving of the Holy Spirit—**Acts 2**, **Acts 8**, and **Acts 10**. Which is normative in our day when we come to Christ? Which is descriptive of something that happened uniquely, and which is prescriptive for us? I believe that the norm for us in our day is concurrent salvation and receiving of the Holy Spirit. In other words, I think this passage, **Acts 8**, is the exception, not the norm.<sup>53</sup>

If that's the case, then the question is why did God make this exception in the case of the Samaritans in **Acts 8**? What's he doing here? Here's what I would suggest. I think God did this unique thing in Samaria in order to authenticate this new move of the Holy Spirit outside of the Jewish world and into the non-Jewish world. I think Peter and John needed to see with their own eyes and affirm as apostles what God had done in saving these non-Jewish people. And so God waited until the apostles came to deliver this guarantee of the Holy Spirit to the Samaritans.

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That is the rule, but there are exceptions. A few times, believers are baptized, then receive the Spirit, but there is no indication of such a pattern in the rest of the NT. In every case, only believers receive both the Spirit and baptism—the one constant is faith.”

<sup>49</sup> Many reformed theologians have made the point that regeneration precedes faith. For more on that, see the Ask Pastor John podcast entitled, “Does Faith Cause Regeneration,” 04-25-22: <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/does-faith-cause-regeneration>. I agree with this from a philosophical and theological standpoint. But from a practical standpoint, I would see the work of faith and regeneration as coextensive in the life of a believer. Nobody saves themselves as John makes clear in his Gospel. The Spirit regenerates. But it is still appropriate (and Biblical!) for preachers, pastors, evangelists, etc. to put their faith in Christ.

<sup>50</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 218 offers a helpful caution here: “The Spirit ‘blows where it wills’ (John 3:8); the Spirit cannot be tied down to any manipulative human schema.”

<sup>51</sup> To clarify, when I say Pentecost, I'm referring to the disciples in the upper room (Acts 2:1–13). I'm not speaking of the 3,000 converts who were saved and indwelt by the Spirit after Peter's sermon (Acts 2:37–41). Those new disciples at Pentecost follow the typical pattern where faith in Christ and the indwelling of the Spirit are coterminous. The disciples in the upper room, including the twelve, received the Holy Spirit even though they were already believers in Christ Jesus. They had even seen Christ raised from the dead. They already believed. In a strictly hypothetical scenario where one of these disciples died in between Jesus's resurrection and Pentecost (at most fifty days), then they would be received into eternity as legitimate believers. A corollary would be the thief on the cross (Luke 23:32–43).

<sup>52</sup> Another possibility includes the twelve men in Acts 19:1–7 who were only baptized with “John's baptism” and had not received the Holy Spirit. This is a different matter altogether which we will address later in the book of Acts.

<sup>53</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 330: “The two stages to the Spirit's appearance are part of the scene's unusual context, where church practice is breaking new ground, so that a confirmation and an affirmation are noted in a way that is not a paradigm for later practice.”

And in doing that, God created a new unity in the church between Jews and Samaritans.<sup>54</sup> Remember these two groups hated each other.<sup>55</sup> And this move of God was authenticated. God was in this, and there was no denying that. Nobody can say, **“O those Samaritans think they believe in Jesus, but they don’t have the Holy Spirit.”** They do. And there’s no denying it. They are part of the “capital-C Church” now.<sup>56</sup>

It’s not really about Jews and Samaritans and Gentiles anymore. In Christ, there is no such thing as a half-breed!<sup>57</sup> The ground is level at the feet of the cross. It’s not about male and female or rich and poor or slave and free. It’s about saved and unsaved. It’s about whether or not the Holy Spirit lives inside of a person! That’s the way that God is dividing the world from this point forward.

**So why is this significant for us? Why have I taken the time to unpack this difficult issue in this difficult passage? Because we are one in Christ. We have the same Holy Spirit, regardless of our age, gender, race, demographic or denominational affiliation. That’s something to celebrate. That’s something to praise God for.**

**And also let me say this. You don’t have to beg God to give you the Holy Spirit. And you don’t need an apostle in our day to come to you and implant the Holy Spirit inside of you. In this post-apostolic era, God gives the Spirit to you as a free gift when you give your life to Christ. When you get saved, not only do you get salvation from your sins and an everlasting inheritance, but you also get the greatest force on planet earth deposited inside of you to help you become more like Christ. The Holy Spirit lives inside of you, if you are a believer.**

**The Holy Spirit is a gift. You can’t work for that gift. You can’t manufacture that gift. You can’t fake it either. And you certainly can’t pay for the Holy Spirit, as we’ll see in just a minute.**

So, back to the narrative. Here’s what Luke records next in **verse 18**. Watch what happens with this “baby-Christian” Simon. He hasn’t parted yet with some of his bad habits. The threat with new believers who are still a little rough around the edges is sinful ignorance. We’re going to see that now.

Look at **verse 18**.

<sup>18</sup> Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands,<sup>58</sup> he offered them money,<sup>59</sup> <sup>19</sup> saying, “Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 330: “The apostles’ presence and response are an endorsement of Philip’s work, elevating him as also being an instrument of God. ... The prayer of the apostles allows God to show his acceptance of the Samaritans so that the entire church can see it. ... The laying on of hands and confirmation of the Spirit are actions that indicate fellowship and identification with these new believers. The result is the unity of the church as all participate in the expansion to Samaria.”

<sup>55</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 195: “[The Samaritan believers] were not to set up a separate, rival Samaritan church, as they had set up a separate, rival Samaritan temple.”

<sup>56</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 198: “The problem of the barrier between the Jews and the Samaritans had now been resolved, and the Samaritan believers were one with the Jewish believers.”

<sup>57</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 215: “The gospel is the great equalizer. In the gospel there are no ‘half-breeds,’ no physical rejects, no place for any human prejudices. There is acceptance for all, joy for all, ‘great joy for all the people’ (Luke 2:10).”

<sup>58</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 193: “This event was obviously visible in some way, but exactly how it was manifest, the verse does not state. In light of what happened in chapters two and ten, what probably became visible was the gift of speaking in tongues. This is by no means certain, but because the text implies it was something visible, it would indicate just that.”

<sup>59</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 219: “As a professional Simon was impressed with the commercial possibilities of the phenomenon he had just witnessed. He therefore offered Peter and John money for the trade secret of how to dispense the Spirit through the laying on of one’s hands. Though a complete misunderstanding of the Holy Spirit, Simon’s behavior was completely in character for a professional magician. Tricks of the trade were often exchanged among them in financial transactions. They were viewed almost as commercial commodities.”

<sup>60</sup> The English word “simony” derives from this passage. Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Belfast; Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002), 417: “SIMONY: From the name of Simon Magus (Acts 8:18–20), who thought that the power of the Holy Spirit could be bought; the sale or purchase of ecclesiastical position or office. This evil, though condemned by the plain teaching of Scripture (cf. Acts 8:20) and by the Council of Chalcedon in 451, became widespread in medieval times and was one of the corruptions the Reformers battled against. The practice was dealt with only very slowly in England, where the monarch assumed the pope’s power, including trafficking in ecclesiastical preferment. It was a source of much contention in Scotland as the Presbyterians opposed the impositions of the Episcopal party.”

Now this is a scary moment right here. We just saw a few chapters before this the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11). They also had a twisted view of money and the power of God.<sup>61</sup> So you can imagine that this is not going to go over well with the Apostle Peter. **Peter's liable to blow a gasket right now because of this.**<sup>62</sup>

**And think about this for a moment. Have you ever seen a baby-Christian do something that made you cringe? That's how I feel about this situation.** I just want to say, “Simon, what are you doing? Haven't you heard about Ananias and Sapphira? Peter's about to lose it with you.” This is a “**bless your heart, this guy doesn't know what he's doing**” moment in the life of this new believer Simon. And Simon Peter is about to lose it with him.

Look at verse 20.

<sup>20</sup> But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish<sup>63</sup> with you,<sup>64</sup> because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! <sup>21</sup> You have neither part nor lot in this matter,<sup>65</sup> for your heart is not right before God. <sup>22</sup> Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.<sup>66</sup> <sup>23</sup> For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness<sup>67</sup> and in the bond of iniquity.”<sup>69</sup>

What's the threat with a new believer like Simon?<sup>70</sup> The threat is sinful ignorance. The threat is bad habits. **And bad habits die hard.**<sup>71</sup> Simon's been a believer for about ten minutes, and he is already being threatened by Peter with excommunication.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> W.A. Criswell wrote: “Money will buy luxuries, but it will not buy spiritual power. Money will buy advancement and preferment, but it will not buy the recognition of God. Money will buy sycophantic, fawning favor and accolades, but it will not buy soul-respect. Money will buy libraries, but it will not buy poetic fire or insight or wisdom. Money will buy a prostitute, but it cannot buy love. Money can buy diamonds, but it cannot buy the sparkle and light in the eye. Money can buy pleasure and entertainment, but it cannot buy happiness. Money can buy a suit, but it cannot buy a physique. Money can buy medicine, but it cannot buy health. Money can buy a house, but it cannot buy a home.” Quoted in Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 13, Kindle.

<sup>62</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 413: “The attempt to buy (and sell) the gift of conveying the Spirit of God amounts to an attempt to manipulate God himself, which is not only impossible but a most serious sin. God's good gifts can only be received with thankful hearts, not bought and sold and used for one's own purposes.”

<sup>63</sup> Sproul, *Acts*, 143–4: “We find here a biblical euphemism. What Peter said was this: ‘You and your money go to hell.’” Schable, 413: “Since Peter calls Simon to repentance; the translation of v. 20b with to hell with you and your money!” (Phillips; cf. GNB) is therefore not appropriate, unless it is understood as a colloquial idiom which expresses disgusted rejection and thus is not taken literally.”

<sup>64</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 333: “In sense it reads, ‘May destruction take your money with you’ (τὸ ἀργύριόν σου σὺν σοὶ εἴη εἰς ἀπώλειαν, *to argyriou sou syn soi eiē eis apōleian*, may your silver together with you be into destruction). This is the only use of a present optative in the NT (BDF §384). It states a wish that also is a rebuke and warning.”

<sup>65</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 220: “The word translated ‘ministry’ [ESV: ‘matter’] is *logos*, a word used throughout Acts for the gospel (cf. 8:4).”

<sup>66</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 414: “The formulation of the conditional clause with the future indicative (first class conditional) indicates that the repentance of Simon is a real possibility.”

<sup>67</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 220n123: “Cf. Deut 29:18, where the phrase ‘gall of bitterness’ (‘bitter poison,’ NIV) refers to idolatry as a root that bears the bitter fruit of apostasy.”

<sup>68</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 414–5: “The expression probably does not describe Simon's emotional attitude in terms of ‘bitterness at the success of Philip's preaching and the ability of the apostles to confer the Spirit,’ i.e., in terms of envy, but in terms of Simon being destined for ‘bitter anger’ in the sense of Simon experiencing the wrath of God or in terms of ‘bitter poison’ in the sense of Simon experiencing the bitter results of his sinful attitude.”

<sup>69</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 414: “While it is true that if believers are not on guard about their actions or attitudes, they may still ‘perish’ (ἀπώλεια); this term does not necessarily mean ‘the opposite of salvation’ but could mean the kind of instantaneous death that Ananias and Sapphira suffered (5:1–11).”

<sup>70</sup> Vickers, “Acts” in *John–Acts*, ESVEC, 409 sees Peter's comments as further evidence of Simon's insincerity of faith: “Taken separately, these comments from Peter are devastating, though in certain contexts they could be said to a believer. But together the call to repent and ask forgiveness, Simon's wrong heart, the denial of his share among believers together, and Peter's rebuke, ‘May your silver perish with you’ (Acts 8:20), lead to the conclusion that Simon was not a genuine believer... Simon does not act like a believer, and Peter does not treat him like one.”

<sup>71</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 219: “Throughout Acts human greed is always depicted as a most destructive force. It certainly was so for Judas (1:18) and for Ananias and Sapphira (5:1–11). It would continue to be so in many subsequent episodes in Acts.”

<sup>72</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 415: “Despite his faith in Jesus expressed in baptism (v. 13) his intentions are still wicked, at least as far as his attempt to buy the power for conveying the Spirit is concerned.”

But what's the opportunity here? The opportunity is spiritual instruction. Simon's about to grow. He's about to learn a valuable lesson, if he's teachable. And who better than Simon Peter to teach him?

Now some people have surmised from these verses that Simon wasn't actually saved at this time. How could he be saved and think that he could buy these apostolic gifts? And I know good people and good pastors who conclude from this that Simon wasn't saved. They assume that he was a false convert.<sup>73</sup> I understand where they're coming from, but I respectfully disagree.

I think that Simon's salvation in **verse 13** is legit. By inference also, he was filled with the Spirit when Peter and John laid hands on the Samaritans in **verse 17**.<sup>74</sup> I know that sometimes people feign true conversion and even get baptized. I know that. I've seen that! But I don't see that here. I think Luke would have clued us into that more clearly if that was the case.

What I see here is a baby-Christian doing something stupid. Do baby-Christians do stupid things sometimes? Do mature Christians do stupid things sometimes too? Absolutely!

Some people assume that because Peter told Simon to repent in **verse 22** that this is an indication that Simon wasn't truly saved. But I think that's a false view of repentance. Do saved people not need to repent? They do! I have to do that often. There's power that comes from open-hearted confession of sin and repentance from it.

**I don't repent from sin now as a Christian because I need to get saved. And I don't repent in order to be saved. That ship has sailed. That salvation has been secured for me on the day of my salvation... on the day that I received Christ as my Savior. I repent now because that's what saved people do. I do it for sanctification not salvation. And as the Holy Spirit, living inside of us, pricks our consciences and convicts us of sin, we repent and draw close to the Lord. 1 John 1:8 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."**

Now for the record, I do believe that there are false converts in the church. I believe that there are weeds among the wheat (see Jesus's parable in **Matt 13:24–30**).<sup>75</sup> There is such a thing as apostasy too. John said, "They went out from us, but they were not of us" (**1 John 2:17**). But that's not what I see here with Simon.

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<sup>73</sup> For example, see the comments by Sproul, *Acts*, 144: "Some argue that the statement Luke makes in verse 13 indicates a genuine conversion of Simon that was quickly followed by a serious and radical fall into sin. I do not think that is correct, because true faith is the result of the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit, and when the Holy Spirit regenerates people, they are set free, no longer slaves to sin. There is a kind of faith that is merely cognitive, which is likely what happened to Simon. Simon could not deny the reality of what he had seen with his own eyes, but he did not have saving faith. His trust was not in Christ, and he was still looking to continue his career as a successful sorcerer." Similarly John MacArthur, 237–47 entitles his entire sermon on this passage (Acts 8:9–24), "The Faith that Does not Save."

Other commentators refuse to take a definitive stance on this issue. For example, Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 328–9 gives a list of commentators who view Simon's conversion as authentic and others who view it as a false conversion. Then he closes the issues by saying (following Witherington), "These early verses alone do not settle the matter." See also the comments of Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart in their chapter on Acts in *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, fourth edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014) 112–31. It must be nice for these scholars to comment broadly on these issues and fail to make a definitive conclusion. Pastors preaching to congregations who are pining for answers to these questions aren't afforded that luxury.

For my part, I'm inclined to follow the reasoning and conclusion of Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 409: "In view of Simon's subsequent behavior, some have doubted whether Simon experienced a genuine conversion. Luke's description leaves little room for debate, however. He states that Simon "believed" or (if the tense of the verb ἐπίστευσεν is interpreted as an ingressive aorist) 'came to faith,' and that he was immersed (βαπτισθεῖς) as an expression of his repentance and after a profession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Savior from sins. There is no reason to doubt that Philip would have followed the practice of the Jerusalem church regarding baptism as linked with the acceptance of the message about the need for repentance and about faith in Jesus as Messiah and Savior (2:38, 41)."

<sup>74</sup> A complicating issue with this view is that many church fathers viewed Simon's conversion as illegitimate. Some even viewed Simon as the father of much antichristian sentiment in the early church (e.g. Gnosticism, Simonianism, spiritism/demonism, etc.). See Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 215 for more on the church fathers Justin Martyr and Irenaeus and their analysis of Simon. Justin himself was a Samaritan believer, so his criticism of Simon as a false convert might reflect a legitimate historical tradition. But an early textual accretion in Codex D views Simon's actions positively, speaking of his "weeping copious tears." Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 338: "The reading is not original but does show that one could read Simon's response positively in contrast to the way suggested here that the verse be read."

<sup>75</sup> Vickers, "Acts" in *John–Acts*, ESVEC, 409: "False believers have participated, and still do, in Christian communities since the apostolic era."



Because look at **verse 24**.

<sup>24</sup> And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."<sup>76</sup>

I don't look on Simon's words here with suspicion. I think he was sincere.<sup>77</sup> I think he recognized his error and humbled himself and sought the intercession of these apostles.

Sometimes, as we see wonderfully illustrated for us here, God uses another believer—maybe a teacher or a mature disciple—to help us see our own sin when we are blind to it. And I've come to see that as a gift from God. That's one of the many blessings of being in a church community.

I love two things about what happens between these two Simons here. First of all, I love that Simon Peter didn't hold back with Simon. He didn't pussyfoot around with him. **He didn't pull him aside and say softly, "O Simon, bless your heart!"** The depth of Simon's sin and his enslavement to these bad habits required a direct, bold, aggressive confrontation. Peter let him have it. The health of the church was at stake here.

And here's another thing that I love about this passage. Simon received this correction. He was teachable. He repented. Simon "the Great" wasn't so great. He copped to his sin and humbled himself. And the church was protected from this great error and the perpetuation of old sin habits. **With every threat in the church, there's an opportunity. Where sinful ignorance is present here, God has appointed leaders in the church to give spiritual instruction.**

By the way, Jesus didn't send the apostles out to just make converts. The Great Commission is more than just conversion. **We're not called to just make converts. Jesus told us to make disciples. We don't just get people saved and then "next, you're done" ... move on to the next person. Jesus told us to go into all the nations baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.**

Simon, as a new believer, could have screwed up this new Samaritan church in a hurry if he wasn't confronted! Simon was a danger to himself and others. The same is true in our own day when baby-Christians, who haven't dealt with their sin, try to lead the church, or they refuse to be taught and instructed by church leaders.

Or—this is the greater threat, I think—when leaders in the church refuse to confront the baby-Christians and the sins that they are enslaved to, that could jeopardize the health of the church also. That's a real threat in today's churches. Many Christian leaders today lack the courage to stand up to sin and confront it when it jeopardizes the health of the church.

As a conclusion to our text, look at **verse 25**.

<sup>25</sup> Now when they [that's Peter and John]<sup>78</sup> had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel<sup>79</sup> to many villages<sup>80</sup> of the Samaritans.

So there's an example of the apostles laboring *themselves* to fulfill Christ's mission. They didn't just delegate that to the likes of Philip and the Apostle Paul. They were preaching the gospel in other Samaritan villages, not just the city where Simon was located.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 221: "Luke gave no further information on Simon the magician. He remains a shadowy figure. Luke, however, made his point. Christianity has nothing to do with magic; magic is powerless before the genuine power of the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit can neither be manipulated nor bought. Simon illustrated that."

<sup>77</sup> Many commentators parse Simon's words and suggest that he didn't truly follow through with what Peter told him to do. They assert that he didn't truly "repent" since he asked Peter to pray for him instead of praying himself. I believe this is overreading the text. Luke doesn't clarify one way or the other. The balance of evidence suggests legitimate repentance here with Simon. And this is more practical than we realize. All things being equal, we should give the benefit of the doubt to a "repenter." We shouldn't approach a modern day Simon with suspicion either.

<sup>78</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 336: "The antecedent to 'they' is unclear but is most likely the apostles Peter and John, given the previous unit. Philip may be with them, as the next scene (vv. 26–27) has Philip and the eunuch both coming from Jerusalem."

<sup>79</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 221: "The reference to the apostles 'preaching the gospel' forms an 'inclusion' with the identical words in v. 4, thus rounding off the narrative."

<sup>80</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 415 states that there were 140 settlements in Samaria in the Hellenistic period and 146 villages in the early Roman period.

I think it's wonderful here how John especially was preaching to the Samaritans. John wanted Jesus to call down fire from heaven to destroy the Samaritan villages. Remember that? That's how much he hated them. Now he's going about these Samaritan villages and preaching the gospel and giving them an opportunity for saving faith. **"Come join my family. Come be my brother or sister in Christ."** That's amazing! What a wonderful transformation God has brought about in Peter and John's life as well as Simon and these Samaritans.

God's changing their lives too, even as apostles! God's sanctifying them. **The work of discipleship doesn't stop just because you become a spiritual leader in the church.**

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I'll close with this. I don't have any great illustration to close with. I don't have a great quote that really summarizes what I'm trying to drive home here. I wish I did.

Instead of closing with something like that, let me close this way. Let me close with a question. What opportunities are there for us right now as a church? What are our threats and what are our opportunities? And are you taking advantage of those opportunities?

Without judging you in any way, let me just ask that question again: Are you taking advantage of the opportunities that God is giving the church? Are you serving Christ? Are you evangelizing for Christ? Are you committed to kingdom work and the proliferation of the gospel?

Let me just make this plea on behalf of Christ and his church. There are thousands of people in San Antonio, Texas, right now, who will spend eternity separated from Almighty God. What are we going to do about that? I believe that what Jesus said in his days is true in our day, "The fields are white unto harvest" (John 4:35).

The opportunities are there for us as a church to fulfill Christ's mission. Here's my suggestion—**spend yourself on those things. Spend yourself on the joy that comes when a person gives themselves to Christ for the first time. Spend yourself on evangelism that leads to new life in Christ. Spend yourself on spiritual instruction and discipleship.**

I'm not saying quit your job and hit the streets preaching the gospel. God might be calling some of us to that. I'm saying go to work tomorrow with a "mission mentality." Give yourself to these things: evangelism, discipling, new life, new birth, salvation, sanctification, spiritual instruction, etc. O what amazing opportunities are out there for us!

**Spend yourself on those things. The opportunity is there for us to take advantage of. Let's not waste that opportunity. Let's pray for that right now.**

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<sup>81</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 221: "Not only did they endorse the Samaritan mission, but they also enthusiastically participated in it. A new stage in the Christian mission had been reached—the witness to Samaria."