

The context of tonight's passage is that when the religious leaders approved of Stephen's murder, great persecution broke out against the church. Saul, who later becomes known as Paul, seems to be one of the ringleaders in the persecution, as he dragged people out of their homes to put them into prisons. This persecution forced believers to flee Jerusalem with their families. We find out in chapter 9 that Paul got permission to go on a witch hunt to Damascus to capture believers who fled in order to take them as prisoners back to Jerusalem.

And what was their crime? They had trusted Jesus as the personal Lord and Savior. At every turn, the gospel message met resistance, so that God's people were in danger. Still, in spite of all the opposition, the gospel continued to spread and people continued to get saved.

In our passage last time we saw how Phillip, another of seven men who were chosen to take care of the Greek widows, fled to Samaria, where he preached the gospel. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Philip performed miracles, healed the lame, and cast out demons. The Samaritans all listened to his presentation of the gospel, and a large number surrendered their lives in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ.

In tonight's passage, Luke introduces us to a man called Simon the Magician who brings a different kind of opposition to the gospel, but one that was equally dangerous, and potentially more destructive. Let's take a look at how the gospel continued to spread, and overcame this new obstacle as we read Acts 8:9-25.

In my bible, ahead of this passage, in bold letters, there is the heading, "Simon the Magician Believes." When we focus on the heading, the words suggest that Simon received Jesus Christ into his heart as Lord and Savior, and was saved. The text, on the other hand, does not tell us definitively that he was saved. It does say that he believed and was baptized, but it does not tell us whether or not Simon received the Holy Spirit, only that he offered to pay for the knowledge of how to give the Holy Spirit.

For this offense, Peter declares, "May your silver perish with you." He told Simon that he had neither part nor lot in the matter of the giving of the Holy Spirit, and that he needed to repent, and ask for forgiveness. The gall of bitterness can refer to apostasy, or idolatry, and the bond of iniquity means to be lost in sin. Simon does ask for Peter to pray for him, which shows a fear of the Lord, but it does not definitively indicate that Simon repented and surrendered his life in faith.

Scripture does not back the traditional belief that Simon got saved. There are other traditions, also not backed by Scripture, that Simon later perverted Christian doctrine in Rome, and was the founder of the gnostic heresy. Gnosticism did not develop fully until the second and third centuries, but basically it taught that God was impersonal, and not even aware of individual lives. A person ascended to God through a long series of levels, each level requiring the acquisition of special knowledge.

Maybe Simon got saved, maybe not. James wrote that even the devils believe, and tremble. This reminds us that going through the motions of faith are not the same as truly believing, and allowing that faith to direct our lives.

Simon practiced magic; literally he practiced sorcery, which is the exercise of control over nature, or people, using demonic powers. He was filled with pride, and boasted that he was somebody great. He enjoyed the power he exercised over people. He liked that others said that he was the power of God. When people are full of pride, and give themselves over to demonic forces, it is very difficult for them to break those spiritual bonds. Jesus is the great bond-breaker,

and there is hope for everyone through faith in Jesus Christ. But, Jesus said that if we are going to be one of His disciples we must take up our cross daily, and follow Him. He also said that we would know who really belongs to Him by the evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in a person's life.

On the other hand, the bible says that Simon believed, and was baptized. Baptism is an important evidence of faith, but baptism is not what saves a person. The bible says that Simon followed Philip, which may indicate that he submitted to Philip's discipleship, or it may be that he was enthralled by the miracles that Philip performed.

So was Simon saved, or not? When a person makes a profession of faith, and gets baptized today, are they saved or not? Ultimately another person's salvation is not ours to judge, but we can know for certain whether or not our faith is real. We can know for certain if we have the Holy Spirit directing our lives. We know in our hearts, and in our minds, if Jesus is the Lord over our lives, and if we have been born again. We know if we live in faith, or we live in doubt. We can know if we have the fruits of the Spirit, or if our lives are void of God's love and grace.

When word reached back to the Apostles in Jerusalem that Samaritans were accepting Christ as Savior and Lord, they sent Peter and John to check it out. While the Jewish establishment would not defile themselves by traveling to Samaria, or associating with the Samaritans, the Apostles were more open minded, because they had preached, and ministered, to the Samaritans as an extension of Jesus' ministry, before His death. They saw first hand God's work among these people, and they were anxious to see if God's hand of grace extended to the Samaritan people.

The bible says that these new believers did not receive the Holy Spirit when they first believed, but when Peter and John laid their hands on them; the Spirit came in some way that was unmistakable to Simon. It may have been that they spoke in biblical tongues, although that is not indicated here. It may be that there was some physical manifestation of the Holy Spirit, as with the disciples on the day of Pentecost. Remember that every time we see the laying on of hands, or speaking in tongues in the book of Acts, it is in association with the gospel going out to a new people group, and is an indication to the Apostles to receive these people as brothers and sisters in Christ. Today we understand that we are to receive, as brothers and sisters in Christ, all people, regardless of race, color, or background, when there is evidence that they are sealed with the Holy Spirit.

No matter what the outward signs were, the presence of the Holy Spirit in these believer's lives was unmistakable. Simon wanted some of that. The bible doesn't say that he received, or wanted the Holy Spirit upon himself, but that he wanted to be able to do the magic. He wanted the power, prestige, and accolades from the people. He even offered money to get what he wanted.

This is a dangerous trap that people fall into today, and we see this spirit manifest in different ways. Over the years we have had people visit our church, and offer to give us large sums of money if we would make them a deacon. Thanks, but no thanks. That's not how we do it here. We have others suggest that they would join our church if they could have a teaching ministry without following our curriculum, or the philosophies of the teaching ministry of the church. Not only is the answer no, we are going to want to check that person out for a year or so, so that we can know his or her heart and gifts, before we will entrust them with the discipleship of our people. We have to have confidence in their spiritual maturity, and the understanding of the doctrines we teach.

Less sinister are sincere Christians who just want to do more for the Lord, or who struggle in the secular jobs, wanting to pursue ministry as a better way to provide for their families. Please here my heart. You do not want to enter vocational ministry unless God calls you to that ministry. If not truly called by God, the devil will eat you up. On the other hand, if God calls you, you must answer that call with all your heart, and with all of your faith.

God does not call everyone to the same role, but He does have a purpose for every believer. We must learn to be happy with whom we are in Christ, and to completely embrace His revealed will. I often say that there is no better place to be, than in the center of God's will. Invest yourself in God's will for your life, because that is where you will be most happy, complete, and at peace with yourself, and with the Lord.

Perhaps at some point Simon the magician got right with the Lord, but when I read this account I see a man who came so close, but he let his pride, and the concerns of the world stand in the way of entering a right relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Please, do not let that spirit rob you of God's grace in your life.

In verse 25, the bible says that after the Apostles testified, and spoke the word of God, they returned to Jerusalem, and as they went, from village to village, they preached the gospel to other Samaritans. This is remarkable in light of the bitter hatred between Jews and Samaritans. It reminds us however, that the gospel of Jesus Christ is able to overcome all of the spiritual dynamics that separate us from one another. The gospel overcomes all prejudice. It destroys pride and arrogance. When God forgives us, we find forgiveness in our hearts for others. When God showers us with His love and grace, we are able to extend that love and grace to people we might otherwise not have anything to do with. When we are born again we care about others, the way the Lord cares about us, and with great joy we receive, as brothers and sisters in Christ, all who place their faith in Him.

As we conclude, notice that before Peter and John left, they shared their personal testimonies with the Samaritans. They encouraged these newborn Christians by telling them about their time with Jesus, and all the things that He taught them during His earthly ministry. They gave personal testimonies about God's forgiveness and His grace in their lives.

The Apostles spoke the word of God. Peter and John disciplined the Samaritans. They showed how the Old Testament prophecies about Messiah were fulfilled in Jesus Christ. They taught them about the Holy Spirit, and the power of God in their lives. They instructed them in righteousness, as they received them into the family of God.

This is the model for the church today. More mature Christians teach and encourage those who are younger in their faith. In our hearts we are to set apart Christ as Lord and always be prepared to give an answer, to anyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. Then we share the knowledge and insight that we gained through our own spiritual growth. We encourage one another with love and respect.

I know that there is the possibility that some may be here tonight who have never surrendered their life in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ. There may even be someone who has never heard the gospel before, or who has not understood it. The gospel message reminds us that we are all sinners before Holy God, and our sin separates us from Him. But God loves us too much to leave us without hope.

The penalty for sin is death, and eternal separation from God, so God sent His Son; that is God Himself took on flesh, and offered His physical life as a sacrifice for our sins. Jesus assumed the cost of the penalty for our sin in His flesh, and utterly destroyed it on the cross, so that we can be forgiven of our sins, and inherit eternal life. The bible says that if you confess

with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. If you need to confess Christ as Savior and Lord, don't let this moment pass. There is no better way to face the challenges of life in New Year, than to do so as a born again child of God.