As we return to the book of Acts, remember that the persecution of the church in Jerusalem has led Philip, who has been forced to flee, to share the good news of Christ with the Samaritans in the city where he is now staying. We learned last week that many people in Samaria were responding to the gospel even as many were being cured of diseases and set free from evil spirits. Let’s pick up the story now as we stand and read Acts 8:9-25.

As we’ve seen on several occasions, Luke writes generally and then zooms in to tell a very specific story. In this case, the specific story is an exception rather than an example of what was generally happening. We know this because vs. 9 begins with the word “but.” Listen to vs. 8 and 9 when read in order. Vs. 8 says, “So there was much joy in that city.” And vs. 9 begins with “But”. So what follows is an “exception story.” The “exception story” features a very well-known celebrity within the country of Samaria…a man known as Simon Magus, or Simon the Magician. Luke writes, “But there was a man named Simon who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, ‘This man is the power of God that is called Great.’ And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic.”

It’s rare that Luke gives so many words to describe an individual who is not Jesus! Clearly Simon was very highly thought of…he had his own disciples…he performed his own miracles…people hung on his words…and some even believed that he was a god, or at least one manifestation of God’s great power. Sound familiar? Here we have a “Jesus” competitor. And that is significant…why? Well, remember that the Jews and the Samaritans were famous for their disagreements about religion. The Jews had their temple, the Samaritans had their mountain. The Jews were expecting a Messiah from the line of David; the Samaritans were expecting a mighty prophet from the line of Moses. It’s possible that Luke tells this story precisely because the natural assumption would be that the Jews had their God-man Jesus and the Samaritans had their God-man Simon.

Think about it…while Jesus was making his tour through Judea, Simon was making his tour through Samaria. Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God and Simon proclaimed that he was a god. And make no mistake, Simon clearly had some form of power. Luke emphasizes that the Samaritans paid attention to Simon specifically because he amazed the people of Samaria with
his magic over a long period of time. Now we do not know what kind of magic Simon performed, but we do know that the use of magic was common in the ancient world, particularly among the Egyptians but also throughout the ancient Mediterranean cultures. When you get home today you can Google the *Greek Magical Papyri* to learn more about what kinds of rites, spells, and incantations were employed in the ancient world. If you look into it, here’s what you’ll find: there was a tendency to pick and choose phrases, curses, sacred words, or “spells” from any number of religions and blend them all together. The *Greek Magical Papyri* dates back to the fourth century AD, and some parts of it are thought to have been gathered as early as 110-150 AD, so what we find there is likely representative of what Simon the Magician would have employed.

Now, the point I want you to pick up on here is that MAGIC in the ancient world was often a product of what we call *syncretism*. Syncretism is the combination of different forms of belief or practice. In other words, the magic used by Simon would likely have had some Jewish words or phrases, some Egyptian imagery and mediations, some Persian songs and even some Greek philosophy. Syncretism was germane to the Samaritan culture specifically because that is how the culture was formed…when foreigners from various countries conquered by the Assyrians were forced to move to Israel and live among the Jews who were also conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BC. Remember that the Samaritans are famous and even despised by the Jews because of their “blended” culture.

It stands to reason, then, that Simon was the national Holy Man of Samaria. His power appealed to the masses, as did his syncretistic tendencies. Notice, however, that when Philip comes proclaiming Jesus, “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. 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” according to vs.6-7. Luke goes on to say in our text this morning in vs. 12, “But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.”

Something very powerful happened there in Samaria…something new…something greater than magic. If all Philip could muster was magic, the Samaritans would have yawned and referred him to hook up with their local magician Simon to see if they wanted to put on a workshop or something. But Philip didn’t come to town with magic…the Gospel of Jesus Christ was far more powerful than any magic. That can be the only explanation for what we read next in vs. 13, “Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.”

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Now think about that. The national Samaritan celebrity, feared and revered by all, the most notable, respected, powerful man in that region, and he’s left speechless by the signs and wonders that were being performed through Philip. He’s so amazed that he “believes” and undergoes Christian baptism. After his baptism, he clings to Philip…that’s what the Greek suggests…he’s a groupie. He can’t get enough of the POWER that he is witnessing every day as Philip makes his way through the city proclaiming the gospel.

The plot of this story thickens as we look to what comes next, beginning with vs. 14: Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.

So…the Apostles, who remained in Jerusalem during the persecution, catch wind of what is happening in Samaria. Peter and John take a road trip to visit Philip and check it out. While they are there, they see that though many have been quick to believe and have undergone baptism, the Samaritans have yet to be filled with the Holy Spirit. I know that raises a lot of questions for some of you, so let’s park here for a bit.

First of all, I don’t know how Peter and John would be able to discern that the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen on the Samaritan believers, but we can make a few guesses. The first and best guess is that the God made that clear in their spirits through prayer. However, we may also assume that the Samaritans were bearing no evidence of the Holy Spirit in them by virtue of their words, their behavior, their habits, or the attitudes of the hearts. The point is clear: those who have been filled with the Holy Spirit are set apart…they are different. Not perfect…but clearly different from those who have not received the Holy Spirit. We’ve talked about that in former sermons, and we’ve also covered the next question: “So what is the relationship between baptism, receiving the Holy Spirit, and the laying on of hands?” The simple answer is: there is no biblical FORMULA for how or when people receive the Holy Spirit. Sometimes it’s immediately upon their baptism; sometimes it’s after the laying on of hands by the apostles; sometimes it’s even before the baptism. In every instance, however, the Holy Spirit is given by God as a gift to the believer, and also as the fulfillment of the promise Jesus made to His disciples in Acts 1, that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them in order to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. OK? Let’s get back to the story.

After Peter and John lay hands on the Samaritan believers and the Holy Spirit clearly falls upon them with power, Simon can’t contain himself any longer. Let’s read what happens next beginning with vs. 18: Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of
hands, he offered them money, saying, ‘Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’

OK, now, before we form a mob and stone Simon, let’s remember the world he was from. Magic was purchased in the ancient world. If someone had a sacred spell that had “worked” for them the last time they were suffering from nightmares, you would have to purchase that spell in order to be able to use it for yourself or others. Simon was used to buying magic. I’m sure some of his investments were a bust, but clearly some of the spells…some of the incantations…some of those ancient rituals he employed had powerful, magical effects…and that’s how he had made a name for himself. So clearly Simon is still thinking like a magician when he blurts out, “Give me this power! Here…take this money…name your price…I’ve got to add this to my magic library and resource center!”

Now, Peter rightly rebukes Simon. In vs. 20 we read: But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.”

I’ve had to have that conversation with a few church members…not from here, of course.

Peter fires both barrels, as he is known to do. Notice that Peter makes no pretense: Simon is standing precariously close to Hell. Though Simon confessed that he believed Jesus was the Son of God, and though he had submitted to baptism, clearly the INTENT of his heart was to USE the power of the Holy Spirit for his own gain and notoriety. The power in Jesus’ name was yet another sacred charm to get him where he wanted to go. Peter rightly discerns that Simon the Magician is still Simon the Magician…there has been no change of heart. Furthermore, Peter also discerns that Simon the Magician believes he can ADD Jesus to his bag of syncretistic magic tricks, so Peter states, “You can’t have even a little part of Jesus without Jesus having all of you.” Jesus can’t be added. Jesus is not one god among many. The Gospel is not another religion among many. Jesus is LORD! That is the ancient creed, and it is uncompromisingly singular. Peter adds, “I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.” I can’t help but believe that Peter had been observing Simon for some time prior to this conversation. Peter can see that Simon is still the servant of the powers he had called upon for his whole life. After all, if a mere mortal conjures up miraculous magic for many years in front of large crowds, and those miracles are not from the One True God, there are not many alternatives left. Either the magic is a trick…a slight of hand…or there are other powers at work…powers that are ruthless, spiritual entities that place a soul into bondage.

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I think it foolish and dangerous to believe that God exists but then hold that there are not other spiritual forces at work, when in fact the Bible speaks quite clearly about the very real and very dangerous presence of fallen angels, demons, spiritual powers and principalities, not to mention Satan himself. No one likes to think about such things, and pastors are remiss to teach about them. Nevertheless, a biblical worldview unapologetically acknowledges that evil is personal, and not all spirits or spiritual signs and wonders come from God. Some are anti-god.

Clearly, however, such spiritual forces can find their way into the church through those who claim to believe, who may even undergo baptism, and yet all the while these deceivers knowingly or unknowingly maintain their allegiance to other powers. That’s exactly what this story teaches us. Paul warns us in 2 Corinthians 11:14 that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Jesus warns his disciples in Matthew 7 to beware of false prophets who come into the church as wolves dressed as sheep. That’s intense, but isn’t that exactly what we’ve just observed in our text this morning? People who long for power…people fascinated by magic…people eager to be admired…people who long to gain control over other people…all are quite likely to be “Simons.” They will play the part, but in the end they are simply trying to purchase power. By the way, in case you think this is a very unusual situation, you should remember that the tendency to use money to purchase blessings, power, and position within the church became so prevalent that it was called “Simony!” You can look that up when you get home as well.

Notice, however, that even for the magician who would dare purchase the gift of God with money, there is still hope. Peter states, “Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.”

Repentance and forgiveness are offered, though Peter is notably reticent. Why? Probably for good reason. Behold Simon Magnus: Here is a man who was visibly moved, impressed, and even compelled to undergo baptism. He followed Philip for days, weeks, maybe even years until which time the Apostles arrived in Samaria. For all practical purposes, Simon looked like a church member. He talked the talk, got his baptism certificate, he participated in the ministries, and over time he witnessed one miraculous, life-changing miracle after another. Yet after all of that…the intent of his heart remained self-serving, self-glorifying, and corrupt. Such is why Peter qualifies his offer of God’s forgiveness with the words, “if possible…” Clearly Peter has little hope that this man who once claimed to be a god would ever take a knee before the One True God. Peter’s countenance is likely similar to that of his Master on that day when the rich young ruler turned and walked away. Nevertheless, Peter says, “Repent…and pray.” To which, Simon replies in vs. 24, “Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.”

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Commentators and scholars differ on how they interpret this story and the way Simon replies to Peter. I will simply give you my take as a pastor who has been at it now for 26 years. Here’s what Simon just said in my humble opinion, “You pray preacher…pray that I don’t end up in hell.” I get that a lot, particularly in my travels. People learn that I am a pastor and inevitably they will ask me to “pray for them,” but the message is often clear that they have no intention of praying themselves. You see, prayer reveals our gods. For Simon knew that to pray to the One True God meant no more magic…no more power from other spiritual entities…and Simon apparently was not quite ready to give up his practice. Now you may think I’m being a bit hard on old Simon, but you should know that there’s a little more history about Simon that we can read about from a man named Justin Martyr. Justin Martyr was born in AD 100 and died in the year AD 165. He was martyred as a Christian. Prior to his death, he wrote several significant works, including a long letter called Apology to the Roman Emperor defending the Christians against Roman persecution. Again, you should Google Justin Martyr’s Apology and read that when you get home this afternoon. It’s amazingly relevant to what is happening here and throughout the world today.

In his Apology to the emperor, Justin Martyr writes about Simon Magus (Simon the Magician) as a very matter of fact figure in Samarian history. According to Justin Martyr, Simon was from the city of Gitta; he was considered a “first god” by many within his country; he ended up in Rome; he traveled with a woman named Helena who was a former prostitute, who was the “first idea” generated by him. According to Justin Martyr, the Romans made a statue of him, giving him “godlike” status among the people.

Based on that testimony, we can pretty much assume that Simon Magus never did take a knee before Christ. Once rebuked by the Apostle Peter, Simon parted ways with the church and went about exalting himself. The sad truth is that not all will be saved…there are those who have been and will remain willing servants of competing lords. Their silver will perish with them.

So, what can we take away from this story?

1) Don’t be fooled by magic tricks. Magic won’t change a human life. Magic won’t bring about healing or freedom. Magic glorifies the magician. I have some friends who are completely taken by a medium who claims to have the power to speak with their lost loved one. This medium named Maureen Hancock claims to be a Catholic, yet her “magic” glorifies herself. She has “shows” where people pay money to see her entertain them by using her powers to speak with the dead. But who is she hearing in the spirit world? Who provides such power? God? The same God who strictly forbid his people from hiring mediums in His word, saying in Lev. 19:31, “‘Do not turn to mediums or

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necromancers; do not seek them out, and so make yourselves unclean by them: I am the LORD your God?” I think not. Spiritual magicians are still peddling their goods in many shapes and sizes, but don’t be fooled by magic.

True life changing power comes from God through the name of his son, Jesus Christ our Lord and the power of His Holy Spirit. Those who perform signs and wonders through the power of the Holy Spirit bring glory to God, not to themselves. And listen, if you have spiritual darkness, if you are spiritually oppressed or even possessed by a demon, there is only one name that has the power and authority to set you free…it is the name of Jesus, and that has been the testimony of millions throughout history around the world. If you are sick or in a crisis, if you are depressed or feeling suicidal, if you are buried in your shame and feel that no one could ever forgive what you’ve done…there’s only one name that can save you. It’s not Mary, or Mohammed, or Buddah, or Maureen Hancock or any other name, for there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved, Amen?

2) We can’t add Jesus. Jesus will not share the throne with any other god or idol. The Hindu religion will tell you that there are some 3.1 million gods, so adding Jesus as one more is no problem. It doesn’t work that way. And by the way, most of the Hindus I’ve spoken with off the record actually believe there is just ONE God who is the creator and is above all others…the Bible makes clear who that is: It is our triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the three in one. What is that God like, how should we think of God? WE look to Jesus, God made flesh, so that we would know God and understand that God knows what it is to be like us. I can’t encourage you strongly enough to resist syncretism. In our pluralistic society, Oprah and so many others encourage syncretism at every turn, but here’s what they are saying: “God is generic, but available to all for whatever they want or need…the god that we need the most is the god within us.” Really? Here’s where that logic goes: If god is actually the divine within all of us, then there is no truly transcendent God, therefore there is no heaven, no hell, no personal evil, no absolutes, no right or wrong, no revelation of God, and ultimately no hope beyond the best that we can muster up among ourselves in the time that remains. There is no answer for how the world was created or the purpose of life. There is no answer for the problem of evil other than, “Hey, we just need to be nicer to one another.” That also makes Jesus out to be a liar, along with all the other biblical writers, who clearly insist that God created the heavens and the earth but is not part of or bound up in the creation. So which is it? The Bible, or Oprah? It can’t be both.

3) There is always hope. If hope remains for Simon Magus, there is hope for us all. And notice the path to hope: repentance and prayer. There is nothing that we’ve done, there is no distance so great, that we are irretrievably separated from God. Jesus made

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reconciliation with God possible for every single person who will simply repent and call upon the name of Jesus in prayer. Repent…take responsibility for your sin…your part in whatever happened…the intent of your own heart, and lay that down at the foot of the cross. There you will find the innocent blood of the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world and renders us “sinless” in the eyes of God. I know that sounds too good to be true, but friends, it’s true. That’s why the Gospel of Jesus Christ is singular and specific. That’s why our mission is to make Him known to the whole world. WE all need forgiveness…we all need to be saved…and there is only One who can save us. His name is Jesus.

Let’s pray.