

The Book Of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

Acts 8:18-25

As we finished last time, we saw how the Jerusalem leaders dispatched Peter and John to Samaria to get a first-hand account of Philip's ministry there. They subsequently gave the apostles' blessing to a group who had been traditionally marginalized.

As Luke records it, "Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit." – Acts 8:17. Let me repeat that, while we are not told what manifestations occurred, it was something obvious to all, including Simon Magus.

Okay, let's pick up with verse 18-19:

"When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money 19 and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

As we get started, I want us to pay attention to verse 19. Luke says, Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands..."

The question is, "What did he see?" What were the obvious external signs that the Holy Spirit had come upon the Samaritan believers?

I'm suggesting that there must have been some obvious, external indications that these believers had received the Holy Spirit. This takes us back to verse 16, which says, "... the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them;

they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus.”

Let me ask a different question: How did Philip, Peter, and John know that, up to that point, the Samaritans had not received the Holy Spirit? What was lacking in their experience that would cause Philip and the apostles to make that determination?

In the same vein, what was it that Simon saw that indicated Peter and John had the power to impart the Holy Spirit?

Consider this: If Peter and John had just laid their hands on these Samaritan believers and said, "Receive ye the Holy Spirit" – would that have captured Simon's attention? I doubt it. Would he have offered money to Peter and John for the ability to lay his hands on someone and just say, "Receive the Holy Spirit"?

If we consider other instances in the Book of Acts where believers are said to have received the Holy Spirit, I think we can make an educated guess as to what was happening.

- On the Day of Pentecost, what happened? Acts 2:4 tells us, "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them."
- In Acts 10, when Peter preached the gospel to a large audience at Cornelius' house we read:

“While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were

astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.” – Acts 10:44-46

- In Acts 19, when Paul met some disciples at Ephesus, he asked if they had received the Holy Spirit.

When they indicated they were not aware of the Holy Spirit, Paul baptized them in water and then laid his hands on them. Here's what Luke records happened next:

“When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.” – Acts 19:6

These examples give us at least a bare outline to work from. In each instance there were obvious, outward manifestations that accompanied the reception of the Spirit.

At Samaria, the external signs which accompanied the reception of the Spirit may have been identical to these or not. Whatever they were, a former magician like Simon Magus took note of them and wanted the power to reproduce them at will.

The next question we need to address is, “Why did Simon want this power to transmit the Holy Spirit to others?”

There are a lot of suggestions offered by various commentators. Let me give you a couple of them:

“Now he felt he was getting near the heart of these mysteries; the latest phenomena were obviously associated with the imposition of hands. If only they

could be associated with the imposition of his hands, what an access of authority and prestige would be his!

So, regarding Peter and John as extraordinarily gifted practitioners of religious magic, he offered to buy from them a share in their secret power. It is this act of Simon that has given the term “simony” to our religious vocabulary.”

“He offered them money.—Simon again betrays the characteristic features of the sorcerer, that is, he is completely controlled by selfish considerations, and is interested in that which is spiritual and holy, only in so far as it may serve as the means of aiding him in his sorceries, and enlarging his personal influence and power.”

"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 (cf. the enormous “market value” of the magical scrolls Paul persuaded the Ephesians to burn—Acts 19:19)." – Polhil: New American Commentary-Acts

Let me point out that all these statements are based on the assumption that Simon was not saved, did not truly believe, and was using the Gospel as means to be restored to power.

I'm going to take a different view on this – for a couple of reasons.

First, as I noted before, Philip was not such a novice that he would have baptized a sorcerer and included him in his recent converts. While some commentators and

preachers have suggested that there is a distinction between believing the gospel and true conversion, that's a theological stretch. How would we determine one from the other.

So let me make a different suggestion. Let's think this through. When these events took place, how long had Simon been a believer? Had it been days or weeks? My point is, a man who had previously dealt in magical arts has seen something amazing happen as Peter and John laid their hands on Samaria's new converts.

What would be the most natural thing for him to do? Wouldn't it be to obtain this same power? He hasn't, after all, had enough time to grow in Christ and realize that his heart motives are not aligned with the scriptures. I think he is simply falling back into his previous lifestyle.

Let's look at verses 20-21. "Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! 21 You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God."

Simon wasn't prepared for the response that Peter gave him. As F.F. Bruce puts it: "On an earlier occasion Peter and John were unable to give silver or gold; now they refused to accept any, and were shocked that it should have been offered to them." – F. F Bruce

The Greek text is much stronger than our English translations relay. It reads much closer to, "Perdition take your silver as it will take you too unless you repent and seek forgiveness for your wicked thought."

The Philips' translation is even stronger. Let me read Peter's response from it:

“But Peter said to him, “To hell with you and your money! How dare you think you could buy the gift of God! You can have no share or place in this ministry, for your heart is not honest before God.”

There is a correlation between Peter's response and the Old Testament concept of things that were dedicated to destruction, or as it is also called, “the ban”. Peter is using the same kind of language: that Simon's money is dedicated to destruction – totally disallowed by God.

As stern as Peter's words were, they were not without the possibility of forgiveness and restoration. Peter told Simon that his heart was not honest before God. Notices he did not say, “You were never saved and aren't now.”

As one bible student points out: “There is, of course, an ocean of difference between saying that a man's heart is not right (present tense), and the declaration that it had never been right. That is precisely the difference between what the word of God says of Simon, and what [some bible scholars] men say concerning him.”

Let's look at verses 22-23:

“Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.”

Again, considering how recent Simon's conversion had taken place, Peter does not damn him for eternity! He

tells Simon the dangers of his heart motivations and warns him to repent.

Peter tells Simon to repent and pray for forgiveness. As many have pointed out, in this situation Peter is using the apostolic authority that Christ gave him and others in John 20:23: "If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

If Simon had been a hypocrite pretending faith in Christ and submitting to a baptism - Peter would never have commanded him to repent and pray. The fact that he does confirms the fact that Simon had accepted Christ – despite his egregious error.

Verse 23 creates some translation issues for commentators. That's because Peter's words are routinely translated into the present tense, but that does not follow at all in the Greek.

What Peter really said was "Repent and pray for forgiveness you're your influence will be like a gall-root of bitterness and a bond of unrighteousness."

He's not saying Simon is currently in bitterness of soul and a danger to the newly birthed Church in Samaria. He's telling him that if he does not break from his unrighteous motivations, he has the potential to be this danger.

It's interesting that Peter uses the phrase, "gall-root". This is actually a carry-over from the Old Testament. In ancient times, the gall (bladder) of a snake was believed to be the seat of its poison. As such, poison and gall were tied together. Peter is using this language to warn Simon of the dangers of his wrong motivations.

Let's look at Simon's response to Peter's warnings in verse 24. He tells Peter, "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me."

I think F.F Bruce is correct when he writes, "Simon was terror-stricken. That he should have incurred the displeasure of men who apparently had so much power at their command was an awful thought..."

There are some western texts which add that as Peter was speaking Simon was weeping – demonstrating his acknowledgement of his errors. The accuracy of these texts are questionable, but it does line up with Simon's immediate response.

Considering Simon's respect for the spiritual power that Peter and John possessed, it does not surprise us that he asked Peter to pray for him that his prediction would not come to pass. Simon apparently understood the dangers Peter had expressed.

Doubting his own spiritual authority to pray for forgiveness, Simon asks Peter to do it for him. When Arnold Ehrhardt considered this passage he noted the "unexpected humility expressed in his beautiful reply" to Peter's denunciation. Ehrhardt adds, "... Simon comes out much better from this encounter with the apostles than the tempestuous St Peter, who gives him no word of consolation."

Did Simon repent and change course? Luke is silent on this subject. Instead he writes, "When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages." - Acts 8:25

The conclusion of this story contains a very positive note. After Philip's success in this unnamed city of Samaria, the apostles carried the gospel to other parts of Samaria – as they headed home to Jerusalem.

In a sense, Philip's bold foray into Samaritan territory forged a path for the apostles to take the gospel to its other regions. We should not miss the irony here: The apostles who had stayed in Jerusalem for three years, were now evangelizing other parts of Samaria. The outer-circle disciple had paved the way for the apostle's success as they took the southern route back to Jerusalem.