

## **Simon the Magicien - Good from far but far from good!**

Acts 8.5-25

I read an article last week about a young Englishman who, at the age of 15, took his first Selfie. At 20, he was taking 200 a day, still looking for the perfect selfie to post on social media. No way he was going to post a photo that wasn't perfect, that didn't make life look good. But life posted on FB or Instagram and real life are often two different things. Some users spend hours to get ONE photo. They all want to look like their lives are perfect.

Fortunately Luke, the author of the book of Acts, is not like that. He takes pictures, so to speak, of New Testament church life and displays them in his book, the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. But the difference between Luke and influencers these days is that Luke posts all of his photos, good and bad. He displays pictures of hundreds of people in the city of Samaria, people who believe, who repent, who are filled with joy. These are photos that we love to look at.

But in chapter 8, he also displays photos of Simon, the magician, one of the most famous men in Samaria. At the beginning, for the first photos, we look and say "Wow! Impressive!". We see a man who believes, who is baptized, who follows Philip. But all of that changes. And the last photos of Simon posted by Luke tell a very different story, a very sad story, of a man who persists in his sin, who stays away from God and lives for his own glory. And when I read this story of Simon, when I look at these photos posted by Luke, I ask myself, why does Luke choose to show us these photos? Why does he choose to tell us this disappointing story? He probably wants to give a realistic view of the church of Jesus Christ, of the work of the Kingdom of God. He describes the joys but he also describes the disappointments, the difficulties. This is the life in building the church of Jesus Christ. He also wants to remind us of Satan's opposition to the work of God. He wants people to know that this is spiritual warfare. There are spiritual forces at work here. But perhaps the main lesson in this story is this: True, authentic faith in Jesus Christ is faith that touches the heart, faith that transforms, right down to the heart. In this story, Simon's first photos are photos taken of a facade, of the outside. The last photos are X-rays, images taken of the heart. And this is what we see: What is happening on the outer facade and what is happening in the heart is not the same thing at all.

To summarize this story, we could take God's words to the prophet Samuel in 1 Samuel 16.7 "man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." Let's use this verse to reflect on the story of Simon the Magician. I want to ask two questions: What is the outward appearance? What does the Lord see in the heart?

### **What is the outward appearance?**

At first glance, here we see the conversion of one of the most important men in Samaria at the time. This Simon is a big celebrity. Look at verses 9 and 10 to see that this is a true superstar: "He amazed the people of Samaria," all from the smallest to the greatest clung to him and said: "This man is the power of God that is called Great."

Simon's fame is not something short-lived. Verse 11 tells us that he "for a long time he had amazed them with his magic". Other historians of the day tell us that he was worshiped throughout most of Samaria. A statue was even erected in his honor in Rome. If Simon was alive today he would have his own show on TV, he would do world tours, and he would have millions of followers on social media. And the magic we read here is not about a few card tricks, pulling a rabbit out of a hat. Simon the Magician is a guru of the occult and all that is satanic. He has real powers given by Satan himself. The spiritual forces of evil are at work in him and through him.

But in verses 12 and 13 there is clearly something going on in Samaria in general and in Simon's life in particular. Those who had followed Simon, they turn from this magician and begin to follow Jesus. They attach themselves to the preached Word, they stop following Simon and they get baptized and they experience great joy. And instead of getting angry when his followers abandon him to follow Jesus, look at what Simon does in verse 13: "Simon himself also believed and, after being baptized, he never left Philip." Here are three really encouraging things that seem to be going on in this man's life. He believes. He is baptized. He begins to follow Philip. He seems to be starting a new life.

The outward appearance is encouraging, but the outward appearance is misleading. This is just a facade. The verses that follow show us a very different reality. In verses 18 and 19, Simon sees the power of the Holy Spirit at work in Peter and John and he offers to buy it with money. In verse 19 he says he wants this power for himself. He is fascinated, captivated by the power that is so evident in Philip and the apostles. And in the apostle Peter's response to Simon in verses 20-23, we see that Simon's heart has not changed one iota. The outside of his life has changed, but look what Peter says about his heart in verse 21: "your heart is not right before God." You fooled Philip. You may have deceived other members of the church, but your heart is not right before God. The facade is impressive. But the heart is not right before God. There is an appearance of religion, of belief, but your heart is not right before God.

### **What does the Lord see in the heart?**

So far we've looked at Simon's photos, but God is using a scanner to see the heart. I suggest that there are 3 things to note in Simon's heart and these are three things that are true of every person who calls himself a "believer" but whose heart is not upright before God:

a) A false understanding of self.

In verse 9 we clearly see the pride of this man. Look at the last sentence of the verse: "saying that he himself was somebody great." The people see him as a god and there is nothing here to say that Simon does not share this idea. And when he sees the power of God at work in Peter and John, instead of humbling himself before that power, instead of prostrating himself before the God of the apostles, he sees a way to further his own fame. He lives for it, for his own glory, for anything that could win the approval and adoration of others. Contrast this with the Apostle Peter when he is in the boat with Jesus and the disciples and he sees the divine power of Jesus in the miraculous catch of fish. The disciples had just worked all night without catching anything and then thanks to the miraculous power of Jesus, they catch so many fish that their nets begin to break. And Peter, when he sees this miracle, this power, he does not say! "Here, if I had this power to myself, I would be the richest fisherman in the world!" No! he bowed down to Jesus and said: "Lord, depart from me for I am a sinful man." There is humility. Before the glory and power of God, Peter sees his own condition. In the presence of immense greatness, majesty and divine power, he humbles himself and he sees himself as he is. But not Simon! He sees God at work and he thinks only of his own gain. Instead of humbling himself before the power of God, he thinks about his own self-aggrandizement.

b) A false understanding of faith.

In verse 13 we see a sentence that might confuse us. The text tells us that "Simon himself believed". What does he believe? Who or what does he believe in? Is it possible to believe but have a heart that is not right before God?

We need to understand the difference between belief and faith. Simon believes but he has no faith. In James 2:19 we read: "You believe

that there is one God, you do well; the demons believe it too and they tremble." Demons believe a lot about God; they believe that he is holy, righteous, merciful and sovereign. They believe that he sent his Son Jesus to die on the cross for human sin, and they believe that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. They believe that he ascended to the right hand of the Father and took his seat and began to reign. There are many things that demons believe are true, but demons are certainly not saved! What they believe about God does not cause them to repent, to seek God's forgiveness. And it's the same with Simon. He believes things about God but it makes no difference in his life.

We often hear people say "I am a believer" and often this is accompanied by "but I'm not religious". And normally that means is that the person accepts that God exists, he believes that Jesus died on the cross, maybe he is risen, but these beliefs do not change anything in the person's life. These people believe, but they do not have saving faith. So what does saving faith look like? We have already seen that belief alone is not the same as saving faith. Saving faith is faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. I use two words to describe it: Belief and trust.

I just said that saving faith is much more than intellectual beliefs. And that's true. But there still have to be beliefs. Faith is based on the things we believe. There are things of which I say: this is true! I believe it! Things about myself, about my sin, about the fact that I am created to know God, to glorify him and that I do not do it. I believe it! There are things I believe about God, His holiness, His justice, His grace, His mercy. There are things that I believe about Jesus: the Eternal Son of God who died on the cross, rose on the third day, ascended into heaven, who he will return at the end of time to judge and to reign forever. My faith is based on these truths. I believe these things are true. Saving faith is based on belief in these truths.

But it also takes trust. And trusting in God, trusting in Jesus means taking whatever you believe about God and saying, all of that is true for me. That is to say, "I believe that Jesus died on the cross and I believe with all my heart that he died for me, to save me from my sin, to give me eternal life. My confidence for salvation, my confidence for eternal life, my confidence for my restored relationship with God, is not in myself, it is not in what I have done, it is not in the church, in the rites of the church, it is in Jesus and in Jesus alone, in what Jesus did for me!

Trust in Jesus can say: I have eternal life only because of what Jesus has done for me. There are many who say: God will forgive me because I have done good works. I have eternal life because I am a member of a church. I'll go to heaven because I'm not that bad. I know I am a Christian because I have been baptized. Those who say these things, their confidence, their faith is in themselves, in the church, in their own good works. Their trust is not in Jesus Christ. Simon has a false understanding of faith. He does believe, but it is purely intellectual.

#### c) A false understanding of repentance

I just said that Simon's faith is purely intellectual. But how do we know this is the case? When the Christian puts his faith in Jesus, he says "no" to himself, to his own efforts and "yes" to Jesus. And he says it, not only in his brain, but he also says it in his heart, in the seat of his will, the seat of his desires. And the proof of such faith, the proof that the heart has embraced the work of Jesus Christ, is a transformed life. You could say that the proof of a transformed heart is a transformed life, a life marked by repentance and obedience. And that, we do not see in Simon.

Immediately after telling Simon that his heart was not right before God, Peter says to him in verse 23: "Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you." Since Simon did not understand his sinful identity, he never feels remorse. He never shows any sign of repentance. He never changes his attitude towards his sin. He never sees the true condition of his heart as Peter describes it in verse 23. He never understands that he is "in the gall of bitterness and the bonds of unrighteousness."

And even when Peter tells him about his sin, he asks him to repent, to pray that God will forgive him, Simon does not even want to pray. He doesn't even want to ask God for forgiveness. In verse 24 he asks Peter to pray for him so that he is not punished but he does not mourn his sin against God. He is not overwhelmed by the gravity of his offenses against God. True repentance is a radical change in attitude towards sin. It is an appreciation that sin is heinous in the sight of God, that sin deserves the wrath of God, and it is the longing to turn from sin to live a life that pleases God. And this repentance is absent from Simon's heart.

#### d) A false understanding of salvation

The fundamental problem in Simon's life is that he wants the gift of God, he wants the power of God, he wants the benefits of a relationship with God. But he doesn't want God. He wants to take advantage of Jesus but he does not want a relationship with Jesus. There is no desire for a restored relationship with God, no desire to know Jesus, to worship him, no desire for the presence of Christ. He has no desire to live for the glory of Christ. He always wants his own glory. In verse 24 he wants to escape God's judgment but has no desire to enjoy the presence of God. Verse 13 tells us that he never leaves Philip. Why is he staying with Philip? Why is he attached to Philip? Is it to hear him teach the Word? Is it because he wants to learn more about Jesus? No! The text says that he "saw with astonishment the great signs and miracles which were taking place." He wants the gifts but he doesn't want anything to do with the one who gives them.

Simon, a believing, baptized man in the church. This is the outward appearance. And the exact same thing could be said of all of us: a believing, baptized person who is part of the church. This is what others are seeing. But God, what does God see when he looks at the heart, my heart and yours? Does he see a humble heart, a heart that bows in the presence of God, a heart that recognizes its true condition? Contrary to what JJ Rousseau says about the natural goodness of man, we are all born with a heart that is not right before God. And this is the first thing you have to accept: without a savior, you are lost. Does God see that in your heart this morning?

And I know God sees you as a believing person but does he see faith, saving faith? Maybe there are things you always believed, things you heard from a young age. It's good. The devil also, he believes. But is there any saving faith, this trust that the death of Jesus on the cross was in your place? He took the wrath of God against your sin. Have you come to Jesus in faith and in repentance to receive, yourself, eternal life for you! Have you cried out: "God have mercy on me a sinner"? Have you repented and prayed to God for your sin to be forgiven?

And when God looks at your heart this morning, does he see a heart that longs for God rather than the blessings that God can offer? The salvation that is offered in Christ is not good health, it is not an easier life in this world. It's not a life without hardships. The salvation offered to you is a restored relationship with God himself. Salvation is enjoying the presence of God, it is knowing God, it is loving God and being loved by God. It is eternal life lived from now on in the presence of God, with the Spirit of God living in you. It is eternal life that will be lived in the real presence of Christ. All other benefits of salvation are aimed at leading us to God, in a deeper and richer relationship with God. To cherish the blessings of salvation above God himself would be idolatry. To desire blessings more than God is idolatry. Salvation is to know God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and to find in God and in God alone, our eternal happiness. Do you have that?

May God grant this salvation to all of us, for his glory.