

Sunday, August 31, 2025 | Martyrs

Week 3 | Acts 8:9-24 | “Magic, Miracles, Money, and a Mountebank”

READ: Acts 8:9-24 (ESV)

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is the power of God that is called Great.” ¹¹ And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic.

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. ¹³ Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized, he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

¹⁴ Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, ¹⁵ who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then they laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸ Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹ saying, “Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” ²⁰ But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! ²¹ You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. ²² Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³ For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.” ²⁴ And Simon answered, “Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.”

On September 6, 1995, Cal Ripken, Jr. played his 2,131st consecutive game, surpassing Lou Gehrig’s record for the *most* consecutive games played in MLB history. Coincidentally, next Saturday will mark the 30th anniversary of that momentous moment. But as all Baltimoreans know, Cal Ripken Jr. isn’t just the Iron Man because he played the most games over 17 seasons back to back for 13 years, he’s also a 19-time MLB All-Star, he earned 2 American League MVP awards, 1 Gold Glove Award, and, of course, he helped the Orioles win their *third* World Series in 1983, something they hadn’t done since 1970 and, sadly, haven’t been able to replicate.

Cal Ripken Jr. is a legend. So much so that, even today, his 1982 *Topps Traded* rookie card, if in mint condition, autographed, and graded, is worth *thousands* of dollars. Unsurprisingly, this has led to the creation of numerous counterfeits. The card enthusiast must be cautious not to pay full price for a forgery, but this is easier said than done. In 2000, the FBI estimated that "70% of all signed sports collectibles on the market in the U.S. are counterfeit," so much so that, in the words of David C. Wyld, "This is perhaps the ultimate example of a *caveat emptor* (buyer beware) market."¹

There are *many* counterfeit baseball cards, but there are even *more* mountebank believers, charlatans who make a fine showing but are merely role-playing as Christians. Such a reality has, sadly, been a part of Christianity from its founding. If Satan cannot destroy a community of believers from the *outside*, he'll do so from the *inside*. No one loves going to church more than the devil. Judas was his first forgery, but he was not the last. As we'll see in today's passage, others followed in the betrayer's footsteps, appearing righteous but who were as wicked as demons.

I want you to notice **two** things:

i. **Vs. 9-13 – A magic-user meets a miracle-worker.**

Vs. 9 – In Samaria, there was a man named "Simon" who had a high regard for himself ("saying that he himself was somebody great"), and, even more troubling, he "practiced magic." This, Luke tells us, "amazed the people of Samaria."

Was Simon a charlatan selling snake oil, or was he a genuine magician? And, if Simon were a real magician, does this mean magic is real? It is impossible to answer the first question. There's nothing in the text that suggests Simon was a fraud. But, in answer to the second question, yes, magic is real, though not in the way you might be thinking.

What we might call "magicians" today are, for the most part, more precisely defined as illusionists; they're not real magicians. And the so-called "magic" depicted in series like Harry Potter,² The Lord of the Rings and The Chronicles of Narnia are mere plot devices; they're not real magical textbooks. This is not to disregard those Christians who may be against depictions

¹ Wyld, David C., "Is That a Real LeBron Ball? RFID and Sports Memorabilia," April 16, 2009, *The Sport Journal*, <https://thesportjournal.org/article/is-that-a-real-lebron-ball-rfid-and-sports-memorabilia>, (accessed August 30, 2025).

² Mathis, David, "Harry Potter Turns 25: What I Saw While Reading to My Sons," June 26, 2022, *Desiring God*, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/harry-potter-turns-25>, (accessed August 28, 2025).

of magic in any form. Such issues are matters of the conscience (cf. Rom. 14:1-23; 1 Cor. 8:10-12) and good Christians can disagree.

What I am saying is that, *broadly speaking*, the “magic” we see in pop culture isn’t the same thing as what is described in the Bible. Biblical magic is, without question, demonic. It promotes practices wherein a person might commune with spirits, engage with mediums, and/or use magical instruments for the purpose of supernatural revelation and manipulation—e.g., Wicca, the occult, psychics, horoscopes, and so on.

The Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible defines magic as “An attempt to influence or control people or events through supernatural forces.”³ Unlike in the Western world, where the thought of magic is relegated to fantasy, in the first century, it was a widely held belief that a person could manipulate the gods, demons, and/or other spiritual forces through magic.⁴ According to the ESV’s footnotes,

“Magic in antiquity was practiced by both pagan and Jewish people with the goals of healing diseases, bringing physical blessings, cursing or otherwise harming others, and guarding against both curses and demons. Magicians also claimed to foretell the future. Ancient literature (e.g., Pliny, *Natural History*) and discovered magical books (cf. Ac. 19:19) indicate that magic often involved special incantations (frequently invoking magical names of deities and demons), portions, and the use of magical objects such as amulets, incantations bowls, or figurines.”⁵

But while magic, in some form or another, might be real, the validity of magical practices ought to have little effect on the believer. No magic, however powerful, can overcome Christ and those in whom he dwells (cf. Col. 1:13; 1 Jn. 4:4). Satan is defeated; he’s dying a slow and agonizing death (cf. Col. 2:15). And while he may yet trouble the believer (cf. 1 Pet. 5:8), should the Christian, in the power of the Holy Spirit, resist the devil, we’re promised that he’ll flee from us like the coward that he is (cf. Ja. 4:7).

But this assumes that the believer is not engaging in magical practices. *Though a believer cannot be demon possessed* (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 1 Jn. 1:5), they can be domically oppressed.

This occurs when they invite wicked forces into their hearts and minds through demonic activities. Make no mistake, magic is soundly condemned in both the OT (cf. Lev. 19:26, 31;

³ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “[Magic](#),” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1375.

⁴ Arnold, C.E., “Magic,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Gerald F. Hawthorne, ed. Ralph P. Martin, Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 580.

⁵ *English Standard Bible*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), p. 2109.

Deut. 18:10; Mal. 3:5) and NT (cf. Gal. 5:19-21; Rev. 21:8; 22:15), and thus, believers are to have no part in its influences or practices. When Paul goes to the Ephesians and they receive Christ, the people burned “fifty thousand pieces of silver” (Ac. 19:19) worth of magic books. That’s roughly \$6 million! Thus, from Genesis to Revelation, any supernatural power that is not derived from God himself is evil. And those who are saved from witchcraft do everything in their power, *even if it costs them some money*, to distance themselves from that lifestyle. The believer will have no part in such things.

Vs. 10-11 – Twice, Luke says that the Samaritans “all paid attention” to Simon. And these followers of Simon weren’t a few eccentric nobodies, living on the outskirts of town, but everyone from the “least to the greatest”—i.e., people at every level of prominence and importance. The city even had a saying about Simon, saying that he was the “Great [One],” as if he was the very embodiment of “the power of God.” And though the exact length of Simon’s influence is not specified, Luke does say he “amazed [the Samaritans] with his magic” for quite some time (“for a long time”).

Vs. 12 – But despite the hold that Simon had on the town, the Samaritans accepted Christ. What’s remarkable is that Philip didn’t do anything out of the ordinary; he just preached the gospel. The content of Philip’s message was “good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ.” Luke says that this is what the Samaritans “believed” and the reason why, “both men and women,” were “baptized.”

Vs. 13 – Luke says, “Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip.” But he adds a curious note right after Simon’s conversion. He says that Simon “was amazed” when he saw “seeing signs and great miracles performed.” Remember this, we’ll come back to it in a moment.

So, what’s the takeaway?

Though the stronghold of the enemy is great, the strength of the Lord is greater.

Jesus said in John 16:33, “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world,” and, referencing this very passage, John says in 1 John 4:4, “Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” The power we have through Christ, who lives in us, is of an order of magnitude greater than any power that is in the world.

But to tap into this power isn’t something we envision or acquire through positive thinking; Christ’s power is acquired through practicing the spiritual disciplines. Famously, Paul uses the metaphor of a suit of armor to demonstrate how we are to wield the power of God:

READ: Ephesians 6:10-18 (ESV)

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. ¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

¹³ Therefore, take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, ¹⁵ and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; ¹⁷ and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,¹⁸ praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.

i. Vs. 14-24 – A mountebank meets a minister.

Vs. 14-17 – Luke says that, though the Samaritans had believed and been baptized, the Holy Spirit “had not yet fallen on any of them.” It was only after “Peter and John” had “laid their hands on” the Samaritans that they then “received the Holy Spirit.”

What does this mean? I don’t know, and I don’t think Luke knew either. Luke is a faithful historian, relaying the facts that happened without any explanation or apparent puzzlement.

Should we assume that the Holy Spirit comes in stages? No. As we discussed at length in Week 6 of *Filled*, while faith, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, baptism, and repentance are all connected in some way throughout the narrative of Acts, the sequence of these events isn’t always the same, save for faith. Belief *always* comes first.

Looking at Acts, it cannot be said that the Holy Spirit only comes after baptism; nor can it be said that the Holy Spirit only comes before baptism. In some scenarios, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit comes before baptism (cf. 9:17-18); but in others, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit comes after baptism (cf. 2:38). Sometimes the Holy Spirit comes after the apostles pray and lay their hands on believers (cf. 8:17; 19:5-6), and other times he’s already indwelt a community of believers before they’ve been baptized or had any direct interaction with an apostle (cf. 10:44-48). And then there’s the Ethiopian Eunuch who will be baptized by Philip, but there will be no mention of the Holy Spirit filling the man whatsoever (Ac. 8:26-40)! Are we to assume that the Spirit took Philip away (Ac. 8:39) before he decided to indwell this new baptized believer?

These examples illustrate the challenge of discerning *normative* practice from Acts. While there are truths to be gleaned, we'd be mistaken if we consider *every* detail in the Book of Acts as indicative of what *the church should be* rather than what *the church was becoming*. As Dr. Brian Vickers explains,

“Again, 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. 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*. In the narrative, faith comes first. Discussions about regeneration preceding or following faith are for a later century.”⁶

Regardless, by the time Paul wrote Ephesus, which was around 60 AD (cf. Ac. 19), it was understood that when a person hears “*the gospel of [their] salvation, and [believes] in him, [they are] sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until [all believers] acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory*” (Eph. 1:13-14). *From that point forward in the church's history, to the present day and into the future, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit *coincides* with the moment of salvation.*

Putting aside the curious and confusing sequence of belief, Holy Spirit indwelling, baptism, and repentance, the key thing that should not be missed is this: *the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit*. As we discussed last week, the Samaritans had been alienated from God and Israel for eight centuries, and now they had been grafted back into the vine. *Truly, the Lord is no respecter of persons (cf. Rom. 2:11)*. Or, as Paul puts it in Galatians 3:26-29, “*So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*” The gospel is both inclusive and exclusive: it offers salvation to all, yet it provides salvation only through Jesus Christ. Though all

⁶ Vickers, Brian J, *Acts*, in the ESV Expository Commentary, Vol. IX, John-Acts (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 408.

are called, only a few may come. But should anyone come to Christ, they're accepted into the fold of God, no matter their background or ethnicity.

Vs. 18-19 – Luke shifts the focus from the Samaritans back to Simon. He says that when "Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' 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.'" According to the narrative, Simon heard the gospel from Philip, believed, and was baptized (cf. vs. 13). And yet, he wanted more? Something is not right here. Rather than marvel at the coming of the Holy Spirit, or anything else (e.g., worship, pray, thank God, etc.), he wanted the power to bestow the Holy Spirit on whomever he touched. It seems like just as he had been a magic-user, likely for profit, he now wanted to be a miracle-worker, likely for profit. Is this a classic case where "old habits die hard?" Or is something more alarming going on here?

Vs. 20-23 – Peter's response will dispel all uncertainty about Simon's spirituality. The Lead Apostles give a fourfold rebuke; he curses, confronts, commands, and condemns Simon.

- 1) He curses Simon - "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!"

The language Peter uses here is that of a fisherman. It is the only case of an optative mood in the NT, which makes these words a clear curse against Simon.⁷ This is why JB Phillips translates these words as, "To hell with you and your money!" Simon was trying to buy the power of Spirit, and Peter, with righteous indignation, warns the man that he's on dangerous footing.

Coincidentally, this is where we get the term "Simony" from. Simony is "the buying or selling of a church office or ecclesiastical preferment."⁸ This became a significant problem in the 14th century and was one of the major causes of the Reformation. A church ministry motivated by profit is a *satanic* church that's come straight from the depths of hell—e.g., Joel Osteen, Creflo Dollar, Kenneth Copeland, Joseph Prince, Jesse Duplantis, and so on.

- 2) He confronts Simon – "You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God."

⁷ Peterson, David G., *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 288.

⁸ "Simony," *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/simony>, (accessed August 30, 2025)

Peter wasn't simply saying that Simon could not have the power to bestow the Spirit. His language is that of the OT where the children of Israel were dividing up the land (cf. Deut. 12:12; 14:27; 18:1; Josh 18:7).⁹ Peter was saying that Simon had "neither part nor lot" of Christianity at all.

Simon thought he had everyone fooled; perhaps he had even fooled himself. It is possible to be self-deluded (cf. Matt. 7:21-27; 1 Cor. 3:18; Ja. 1:22, 26; 1 Jn. 1:8), thinking you're something when you're really nothing (cf. Gal. 6:3). But as Ananias and Sapphira learned (cf. Ac. 5:4), God cannot be fooled; he knows all things, even the secrets that our own hearts keep from us.

- 3) He **commands** Simon – "Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you."

Peter commands Simon to "repent" and "pray." The apostle may have come across as **harsh**, but he didn't intend to **harm**; he was trying to **help**. Peter was driven out of a **loving** concern for Simon's soul to say the things that he did. This was tough love, the sort that does not allow someone to remain self-deluded by sin.

That Peter couched forgiveness in terms like "if possible" and "may be" should not lead us to conclude that there was a possibility that God wouldn't have forgiven Simon. **What was in doubt wasn't God's ability to forgive** (cf. 1 Jn. 1:9), but Simon's ability **to repent**. Peter was showing Simon, in no uncertain terms, that he was almost too far gone to redeem. John warns us that "If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that" (1 Jn. 5:16). All mankind is equally condemned because of sin, but not all sin is equal; there are some sins which, if even a believer commits them, will lead to death.

- 4) He **condemns** Simon – "For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity."

Given the present tense, these phrases describe Simon's present condition--i.e, who he was at that very moment. Technically speaking, "**gall**" is bile or the fluid secreted by the liver, but used as it is here, it takes on a metaphorical sense, rendering it something akin

⁹ Bock, Darrell L., *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 334.

to a fatal toxin like poison (cf. LXX Job 20:14).¹⁰ Thus, for Simon to be “in the gall of bitterness” was to say that he was in **mortal** danger. This is made clear by the fact that Peter also says Simon was “in the bond of iniquity,” indicating that this man was a slave to sin, something that cannot be said about a true believer (cf. Rom. 6).

Jesus said in John 8:34, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.” And James makes it clear that if sin runs rampant in someone’s life, it “brings forth death” (Ja. 1:15). John says in 1 John 3:9, “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God.” Should you keep sinning, living in unrepentant wickedness, you have proven by your lifestyle to not be a child of heaven but a child of hell, yet enslaved to sin and bound to Satan’s will.

Vs. 24 – How does Simon respond? He says, “Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.” Peter demanded that Simon repent and pray, and instead, Simon wants Peter to pray for him. He was avoiding taking responsibility, content to leave it to someone else.

Additionally, it is clear that Simon is only concerned with judgment; he shows no genuine contrition for his sin. If this is repentance, it is little better than a child who got caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Simon wasn't sorry for his actions; he was sorry he had been caught. He cared little for the severity of his actions and only about how he was headed for judgment.

So, what’s the takeaway?

The **content** of a person’s tongue and the **conduct** of their life betray the **condition** of their heart.

Be warned, my dear brothers and sisters, as sure as there was a Judas among the apostles, there are false believers within the church. Such a reality is unavoidable. Jesus tells us that the enemy will sow tares among the wheat (cf. Matt. 13:24-30) and send goats among the sheep (cf. Matt. 25:31-46). The parable of the soil shows us that the word of God has a 1 in 4 chance of bearing **genuine** fruit but a 2 in 4 chance of bearing **superficial** fruit (cf. Matt. 13:1-23). The parable of the ten virgins teaches us that only half of those who profess Christ will be ready at his coming (cf. Matt. 25:1-3). And, most telling, are Jesus’ words in Matt. 7:21-23, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does

¹⁰ Strong, James, “5521. χολή chōlē, khol-ay,” in *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible*, (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software), <https://ref.ly/res/LLS:STRNGDICHEBGRK/2022-06-21T13:52:40Z/753146?len=51>, 1:78.

the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" It is not enough to simply profess Christ; you must also possess him.

How can you tell if a believer is truly a believer? Look at their fruit.

READ: Luke 6:43-45 (ESV)

⁴³ "For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, ⁴⁴ for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. ⁴⁵ The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

After talking about the tongue, James says, "Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom" (Ja. 3:13). What a person says and where they go has a way of revealing who that person is and to whom they belong. The content of a tongue and the conduct of a life betray the condition of a heart. Watch and listen long enough, and eventually, a person's true colors will shine through.

Video Description:

Martyrs | Week 3 | Acts 8:9-24 | “Magic, Miracles, Money, and a Mountebank”

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

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Sermon Manuscript:

Grace Pointe Baptist Church

12029 Eastern Ave.

¹¹ Wyld, David C., “Is That a Real LeBron Ball? RFID and Sports Memorabilia,” April 16, 2009, *The Sport Journal*, <https://thesportjournal.org/article/is-that-a-real-lebron-ball-rfid-and-sports-memorabilia>, (accessed August 30, 2025).

Baltimore, MD 21220

Contact: info@GracePointeLife.com

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