

# POWER WITHOUT PRICE

*SERIES: GOD'S SERVANTS IN THE WORLD*

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I belong to a group of local pastors that gets together for fellowship and prayer once a month. Our last meeting was a gathering of the wounded. As we went around the circle and talked about our churches, our families, and our own lives, we each ended up using the language of spiritual warfare. We prayed longer and more fervently than we typically do because of the severity of the struggle.

The Bible recognizes that there is an ebb and flow to history. At times the church advances, and at times it recedes. There are times when barriers fall easily. There are times when evil does its worst, occasions the apostle Paul calls “the evil day” (Ephesians 6:13), when the best we can do is stand firm.

We are studying the book of Acts. If this book is nothing else, it is surely a text on spiritual warfare. It recounts how the first Christians dealt with opposition, difficulty, confusion, and uncertainty; how they spoke and lived their lives in hard times.

There are enemies who will attack from outside of the church, but sometimes the attack will be from within. Consider the sobering instruction given to church elders in Acts 20:28-30:

“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.”

Attacks will come from savage outsiders bent on destroying the faith of those they see growing and thriving, and from charlatans and deceivers within the church. The leaders of the congregation need to defend the saints against both kinds of attack.

In this study we are considering Acts 8, and up to this point in the story we’ve seen opposition most frequently from enemies on the outside: slander, jailings, beatings, and finally the martyrdom of Stephen. We’ve seen the church ravaged, believers dragged from their homes and imprisoned for no crime other than loving Jesus. But we have also seen attacks that came from inside. Recall the story of Ananias and Sapphira, who attempted to achieve recognition with phony claims of generosity, and whom Peter firmly accused: “You have lied to the Holy Spirit.” But here, in chapter 8, we’re going to meet an individual who presents yet another form of attack that will confront the Christian church: Simon the magician.

Chapter 8 has three prominent characters. The first is Philip, one of the young, second-generation Christian leaders who are vital and vibrant and excited about their faith and serving the Lord faithfully. He is a selfless servant of the gospel. The second is a court official of Ethiopia. A guileless convert, he is grateful to the Savior he has discovered, and he longs for baptism and connection to the church. Sandwiched between these two is the third character, this peculiar, shifty, confusing magician called Simon. He is interested in the faith, but he is deceptive. He is the opposite of the other two men in many respects.

Let’s read the text, backing up to include verses 4-8 for context:

**Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. And Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. And the multitudes with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. And there was much rejoicing in that city.**

**Now there was a certain man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying,**

**“This man is what is called the Great Power of God.” And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike. Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.**

**Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, saying, “Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you [may you and your money go to hell!], because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity.” But Simon answered and said, “Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.”**

## **Apostolic Christianity**

Note the role of the apostles. From its earliest days, the entire Christian community was in touch with the apostles who led it and geographically concentrated in Jerusalem. However, in verse 1 we were told that a severe persecution scattered many believers, but not the apostles. For reasons we aren’t told, the apostles stayed in Jerusalem.

But now, after new converts come to faith in Samaria, we see apostles called upon to come and lay hands on the new believers so that they may receive the Spirit. Peter and John enfold this new community of believers in Samaria into the existing community in Jerusalem.

Why doesn’t the Spirit descend on these people when they believe and are baptized? The formula elsewhere in Acts for receiving the Spirit is simple: the Spirit comes when people believe. Water baptism is an outward sign that they belong to Christ, and one expects the Spirit to be present already. The only place we see a different formula is here in Acts 8.

But there is a reason the Samaritans don’t receive the Spirit upon conversion here. This event represents the first time conversions occur without the oversight of the apostles. The time lag in receiving the Spirit allows the church in Samaria to be identified with the apostles and come under their teaching. This lesson, once illuminated, doesn’t need to be repeated.

There is no gospel, no life-changing message that is not apostolic. What we must hold to tenaciously and return to often is what Jesus’ apostles taught. That is embodied in the New Testament, the authoritative, accurate, forever-preserved witness and instruction of the apostles. We must study and believe and teach it.

However, we must also note that the apostles themselves are not required for authentic ministry to take place. Philip and the others are excellent evangelists. God honors ministry in the hands of anyone who will tell the truth. He doesn’t require senior, ordained, credentialed people to do his work. While we don’t have a gospel without the apostolic witness, everybody can and should preach that gospel.

## **Ministry to Samaritans**

In New Testament times Samaritans occupied the region between Judea and Galilee. They were descendents of Jews who had intermarried with foreigners. Their religion was a hodgepodge of Old-Testament texts and superstitions. Samaritans often collaborated with conquerors whose culture and beliefs they added to their own. The Jews, of course, stubbornly refused assimilation and despised their fallen cousins as spiritually defiled, superstitious, and worthless.

We observe in this story the spiritual vulnerability of Samaria. A dramatic charlatan with promises of spiritual power and quick fixes is fascinating to them. Simon Magus has named himself “the Great Power of God,” and they have fallen for his black magic and charismatic self-promotion.

Perhaps you have observed parallels between the Samaritans and our modern culture. Most of the people around us have a twisted version of the Bible somewhere in their head. They have heard some of the stories, usually taught badly. They have had the things they learned at some point in their lives diluted by experts who claimed that nothing in the text could be known or truly believed. Near at hand are the promises of mystics and attempts to synthesize every religion's version of things, so that there is no place to turn for truth. Longing for God is awakened but not satisfied.

Those of us with the privileges of faithful Bible instruction find ourselves increasingly distant from the surrounding culture. If we are not careful, we will treat outsiders the way the Jews treated the Samaritans—as distasteful, dangerous, hard to figure out folks we would do well to avoid.

A curious thing about the New Testament, though, is that Samaritans are rarely presented in a bad light. Remember the story of the good Samaritan, in which Jesus chastises the self-righteous by describing the generosity of an ordinary Samaritan man (Luke 10:25-37). Remember the account of the woman at the well in Samaria, whose brokenness led to faith, and who led her entire city to Jesus (John 4:1-42).

Just like the Samaritans, many who live around us have been fooled by charlatans. May God give us eyes to see our neighbors—some generous travelers, some wishing to drink the water that satisfies forever—who long to know Jesus.

Luke says that Philip comes to Samaria “proclaiming Christ.” When Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, he quoted at length from the prophets, explaining, “The promised Messiah has come.” Philip’s proclamation of Christ, however, probably is cast in terms that would make sense to the Samaritans, who don’t have the prophets to refer to.

Do you remember the gospel hymn that goes like this?

*I love to tell the story  
Of unseen things above,  
Of Jesus and His glory,  
Of Jesus and His love. (1)*

When Philip comes proclaiming Christ, there is a great revival in Samaria. Lives are changed, and there is widespread relief and joy in the Lord. If we live in Samaritan times, one of the questions this text asks us is, where are the men and women who will go into our community and tell the story of Jesus and his love, tell it in terms that don’t require a great deal of prior understanding, offer an invitation that is meaningful? The Samaritans of old were vulnerable to “experts,” those with charisma and drama and presence. The Samaritans in our world are vulnerable in the same way. But like these in the text before us, our neighbors and those among whom we live and work are more open than we usually give them credit for. So who will go and talk about Jesus?

Now let’s consider what we can learn from the attack presented by Simon the magician.

## **The threat posed by a charlatan**

Note the contrasts between both Philip and Peter, and Simon. Philip performs healings and proclaims Christ. His message elevates his hearers as they became children of God. He exalts his Lord and rests in his role as a servant messenger.

Simon, in contrast, practices black magic and promotes himself. He does so based on deception and probably occult spiritual authority. Simon’s message looks down on others and elevates him. He loves standing above the crowd. He is “the Great Power of God.”

Peter comes to minister so that the Spirit will personally descend upon those who believe in Jesus. Peter’s ministry is also for the sake of others, not himself.

Simon, again in contrast, wants the status that comes to the one who can dispense the Spirit of God. He longs for, and asks to buy, the authority to touch people with the touch of God and thereby exalt himself.

What are some of the cautions this raises for us? First of all, we need to consider Simon's excessive enthusiasm for power, authority, and spiritual electricity. Whenever there is authentic spiritual encounter, there is real power. Where God is present, there is real change— healings that overwhelm us, or healings that encourage us over time, or both. But we must not love the powerful demonstration of God without loving the heart of God, without believing the truth of Jesus' death on the cross, without acknowledging our own sin and need for the Savior. And Simon surely forgot (or never knew) the heart of God.

Consider also that this story is told ambiguously. We don't know what happens at the end. We can't say with certainty whether Simon ever becomes a believer or not. Tradition records that he does not, and that seems likely to me.

The stories of Scripture that have no conclusion are intended to present the reader with an opportunity for self-examination. Am I a similar person? How will I respond to the grave warning spoken by Peter?

The last thing I want to mention is the role that money plays in all of this. The first example of duplicity in the life of the church was the story of Ananias and Sapphira, a couple who conspired to hold on to money and lie about it. This text warns against greed as well. Peter declares, "You think God is impressed by your money. You have a very bad view of what is important and what isn't, about what is really powerful and worth having. You imagine money to have an authority it does not have, blessing it does not have, advantages it does not have. You are on your way to hell!"

May God remove the blindness caused by the flashy brightness of wealth and its false promises.

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## NOTES

(1) A. Catherine Hankey, *I Love to Tell the Story*.

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