

Simon the Sorcerer

Acts 8:9-13

Since our study of Acts has been interrupted by my absences these past weeks, let me emphasize where we are in this great history book of the Christian church. I noted, as I preached a few weeks ago, that chapter 8 begins a new section in the book. Chapter 7 covered the persecution and eventual murder of Stephen as the first martyr of the church, but only after he was permitted to give such a detailed and impassioned proclamation of the gospel by declaring and explaining the saving work of God through the history of God's people in the Old Testament. So for many weeks we studied a survey of Old Testament history, but it wasn't just history! It was a survey of God's work of redemption, all of which pointed to Jesus the Messiah.

So Peter's "defense," as we often call it, wasn't a defense offered in order to save his life from his enemies who wanted to kill him. Rather, it was a defense of the gospel, and it ended with a strikingly personal and pointed call to repentance.

Acts 7:51 "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, 53 who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it."

Their response isn't a surprise.

Acts 7:54 "When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth...57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; 58 and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young

man named Saul."

So they killed Stephen, the first martyr of the church. And three weeks ago we studied the persecution that arose, the scattering of the church. But my emphasis that week was not so much on the scattering of the church, but what the church did as they scattered!

Acts 8:4 "Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word."

So that's where we are in the book of Acts. The rest of the book will be an historical account of that preaching of the gospel, beginning in Jerusalem and Judea, but extending "to the end of the earth." The Apostle Paul, of course, will assume a prominent role, beginning in chapter 9, but here in chapter 8 the emphasis remains with Philip among the band of the apostles. Our text today is very personal, with the introduction of Simon the Sorcerer.

v.9 "But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, 10 to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the great power of God." 11 And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time."

Let me begin with a detailed explanation of sorcery, since it holds a prominent place in God's relationship with his people. Specifically, it is forbidden. Thus we begin with,

I. THE SINFULNESS OF SORCERY.

That sinfulness is not hard to prove, and I read earlier in the service one of the prominent Old Testament examples of this prohibition, and I'll read that again in order to provide the foundation of the definition of sorcery itself.

Deut. 18:9 “When you come into the land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominations of those nations. 10 There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, or one who practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, 11 or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. 12 For all who do these things are an abomination to the LORD, and because of these abominations the LORD your God drives them out from before you. 13 You shall be blameless before the LORD your God. 14 For these nations which you will dispossess listened to soothsayers and diviners; but as for you, the LORD your God has not appointed such for you.”

There are a lot of different but related Hebrew words used there, translated witchcraft, soothsayer, one who interprets omens, a sorcerer, one who conjures spells, a medium, a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. The ESV uses some other English words, such as divination, telling fortunes, interpreting omens, or a charmer. All of those words have meaning, with some differing nuance and emphasis, but let me sum all of those things up together.

A. Sorcery is the attempt to gain special revelation without reference to God.

Now, I’m not talking about knowledge in general. If I wanted to learn math, I would find a competent and well-educated mathematician and read his book or take his class. Similarly, we should define science as the pursuit of knowledge, and typically, that refers to studying objectively the world in which we live rather than seeking special revelation from God. Any doctor I see I want to be knowledgeable of human anatomy and physiology, from his own study in med school and beyond. It’s not that kind of knowledge that is in view here. Sorcery has something different

in mind—the pursuit of special knowledge, special revelation, without God!

In its simplest form, sorcery could simply be called the magic arts. And Simon is sometimes called, very simply, Simon the Magician. The reference to magic is not the slight of hand of illusionists who make you see something a certain way that is actually contrary to reality, but rather magic in the sense of the occult. That’s why words like witchcraft or mediums are used, soothsayer, interpreting omens. Fortune telling. Magic. And those things are still with us, all over the place. Trying to gain secret knowledge, knowledge that belongs to God, without reference to God.

The Bible makes a very important distinction between that secret knowledge and the knowledge that God has revealed.

Deut. 29:29 “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”

So sorcery has reference to the pursuit of those secret things that do not belong to us. Like, fortune telling to tell what will happen in the future. Or mediums, seeking to gain knowledge from the dead, or from palm reading. Or psychics as they are called today. Even horoscopes fall into this category.

Beloved, in terms of what we need to know to believe in God or to live faithfully before him, God has given us everything that is necessary. And knowing the future is not part of what is necessary! So we read,

2 Peter 1:2 “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, 3 as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue.”

We often call that the sufficiency of Scripture, and the idea is that everything we need to know God has revealed. Thus sorcery, the magic arts, fortune telling, soothsaying, whatever label you use, those things are the attempt to gain knowledge of what God calls “the secret things.” The secret things that belong to the Lord, not to us. And, therefore, pursuing those things is sinful.

Let me read several additional verses to demonstrate just how serious this is.

2 Chron. 33:6 “Also [Manasseh] caused his sons to pass through the fire in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom; he practiced soothsaying, used witchcraft and sorcery, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke Him to anger. 7 He even set a carved image, the idol which he had made, in the house of God, of which God had said to David and to Solomon his son, “In this house and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put My name forever; 8 and I will not again remove the foot of Israel from the land which I have appointed for your fathers—only if they are careful to do all that I have commanded them, according to the whole law and the statutes and the ordinances by the hand of Moses.” 9 So Manasseh seduced Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to do more evil than the nations whom the LORD had destroyed before the children of Israel.”

Isaiah 47:9 “But these two things shall come to you In a moment, in one day: The loss of children, and widowhood. They shall come upon you in their fullness Because of the multitude of your sorceries, For the great abundance of your enchantments. 10 “For you have trusted in your wickedness; You have said, ‘No one sees me’; Your wisdom and your knowledge have warped you; And you have said in your heart, ‘I am, and there is no one else besides me.’ 11 Therefore evil shall come upon you; You

shall not know from where it arises. And trouble shall fall upon you; You will not be able to put it off. And desolation shall come upon you suddenly, Which you shall not know. 12 “Stand now with your enchantments And the multitude of your sorceries, In which you have labored from your youth—Perhaps you will be able to profit, Perhaps you will prevail. 13 You are wearied in the multitude of your counsels; Let now the astrologers, the stargazers, And the monthly prognosticators Stand up and save you From what shall come upon you. 14 Behold, they shall be as stubble, The fire shall burn them; They shall not deliver themselves From the power of the flame; It shall not be a coal to be warmed by, Nor a fire to sit before! 15 Thus shall they be to you With whom you have labored, Your merchants from your youth; They shall wander each one to his quarter. No one shall save you.”

And in the NT as well,

Gal. 5:19 “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, 20 idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, 21 envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

And of those who are banished from the city of life in Revelation 22, we read this,

Rev. 22:15 “But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie.”

The sinfulness of sorcery is abundantly obvious in Scripture, and let me add one specific explanation of the offensiveness of it. Namely, that,

B. Sorcery is a denial of the sufficiency of Jesus as the word of God.

You see, when we talk about the sufficiency of Scripture, we really mean the sufficiency of God's revelation, his special revelation, namely his Word. And the sufficiency of Scripture means that the word which became flesh, is the final, complete word of God's revelation. So we don't just talk about the word of God. We talk about the word of God that became flesh. And the point I want to stress is that all those ways of God's revealing himself with words, before Christ, all of that revelation finds its completion in Christ. That is the reason why we no longer need further special revelation, further revealed words from God. Because we have Jesus. So we read,

Heb. 1:1 "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, 2 has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; 3 who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high."

So, sorcery is a denial of the sufficiency of Jesus. And here in Acts 8 we are introduced to Simon the sorcerer. And in his writing of Acts, Luke makes sure to emphasize,

II. THE DANGER OF SORCERY.

It's pretty obvious. Look again at,

v.9 "But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great."

A. Sorcery exalts men.

That, by itself, reveals both its danger and its sinfulness. If I stood before you and claimed to know the future, and you were

foolish enough to believe, why that would exalt me greatly, wouldn't it? If I claimed to be psychic, I could advertise on the internet and charge you a fee by the minute to pay me for what claim to know. And, that, too, would exalt me. And that's the point of the this danger. The claim to special revelation, even if it is put in the language of prophecy, anything that allows a man to claim secret knowledge above what can be known to others, exalts that person to claim superiority, and to be exalted.

John the Baptist had a much better approach, for when he saw Jesus, this is what he said...

John 3:27 "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. 28 You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ,' but, I have been sent before Him.' 29 He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease. 31 He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all."

"He must increase, but I must decrease." That's the proper perspective, but a sorcery seeks the glory for himself. And, further,

B. Sorcery substitutes itself for the power of God.

Look at verse 10, speaking of the popularity of Simon in the eyes of the people.

v.10 "...to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the great power of God." 11 And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time."

So if I claim the power to give revelations and interpret omens,

then not only am I exalting myself, but at the same time, I am denying God, substituting myself and my power for the power of God. If my goal is to demonstrate my power and my glory, and if you see that power in me, then you have lost sight of the power of God. And my power becomes that which is prominent. I become God!

v.10 “This man is the great power of God.”

Do you see how dangerous that is? And then,

v.11 “And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time.”

Luke’s explanation here is so helpful, because it makes so very clear what is so very dangerous about this whole matter of magic arts, of sorcery, and of divination. Luke makes it so clear why those things are so ungodly and sinful. They are in opposition to God, they are in rebellion to God, they are in denial of God. They substitute themselves for God.

Don’t take these things lightly in their modern appearances either. I’ve mentioned astrology. And psychics. Spiritualists. Telepathy. Palm readings. Horoscopes. Black magic. The desire to know the secret things that belong to God is a grave offense to him. Having said all off that, what is the alternative?

III. THE GODLY ALTERNATIVE TO SORCERY.

Luke makes that very plain and clear as well.

v.12 “But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized.”

The alternative to sorcery is clear. The alternative to the pursuit of secret or special knowledge is obvious. Then, and now. In the days of Simon the sorcerer and in the 21st century of the

internet. The alternative to divination and the magic arts is nothing other than the...

A. Faithful preaching of God’s word.

You see, you don’t need special knowledge from me. What you need from me, if I am doing that which God would have me do, is a presentation of his word in a way that is clear, plain, personal, and understandable. So you come away not thinking about me or what I have said, but you come away thinking about what God has said in his word.

In contrast to the spirit of sorcery, these are the words which have driven me and my preaching for 40 years now,

2 Tim. 4:2 “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.”

Notice what Luke identifies as the subject of that preaching, v.12 “...the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ.”

In that context, these are the words of the Apostle Paul himself, referring to his own preaching ministry,

1 Cor. 2:1 “And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. 3 I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. 4 And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

So be careful, beware, what you actually seek. The spirit of our age exalts men, even in the church. The spirit of our age

exalts the pursuit of special knowledge, secret knowledge, rather than the knowledge of what God has already revealed in his word. And the means by which God would have you grow strong and well in your faith is by that very means of faithful preaching, faithful declaration and explanation of the word of God, with a focus upon that word who became flesh. “For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”

As I noted in the last sermon a few weeks ago, that work of preaching of the gospel to the end of the earth will be the subject of the remainder of this great book of Acts which we will continue to study for many months to come. But coming back to Acts 8, and to Simon, let me note what Luke again makes clear,

B. A faithful response to God’s word.

We read in the end of verse 12 that “both men and women were baptized.” That baptism represents, of course, their profession of faith. That baptism makes clear that the word which Philip preached was believed. Baptism for the new believer is the evidence of their faith, the evidence of their incorporation into the body of Christ. And such a response of saving faith was frequent and common in that church.

I should note, with Luke, that Simon himself also believed. Perhaps I should have entitled this sermon Simon the Believer instead of Simon the Sorcerer, because that is who he now is. Simon the Christian. And we read that “he continued with Philip.” He stayed with Philip. It doesn’t say for how long, and we will see in the following verses which we will study next week, that he had to be rather severely corrected by Peter, but the simple words demonstrate what the simple response to the gospel ought to be. “Simon himself also believed.”

Such a faithful response should always be the goal and objective of biblical preaching, believing not in the wisdom and eloquence of a man, no matter how great he might be, but believing in the word which God himself has spoken, the word which God had written down for our benefit, the word which faithful ministers of the gospel today continue to proclaim.

I noted Simon’s need for correction in the following verses, but let’s end today with another positive expression of his faith, an expression of faith which we would do well to imitate ourselves. Namely, a...

C. Faithful awareness of God’s power.

Sometimes we can be tempted to take too much of this for granted. We can be tempted to think that the display of God’s power is not personal, or it’s not relevant. We can be tempted just to go through the motions of our faith, or to allow our religion to be a merely common and ordinary experience. And when we do that, we forget this, that God is a God of power. And the power of God continues, even as the word is preached today. It is the power of God to save, and the power of God to change and transform the lives of those whom he saves.

And so we read of Simon,
v.13 “...he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.”

Don’t stop expecting to see such powerful works of God. And don’t stop praying for them. Beginning with the miracle of salvation. The miracle of the power of God to make a hardened unbeliever trust in the saving power of the gospel. Pray for that power to be evident even as this word is preached today. And if you remain in your unbelief, I pray even now that you might see the power of God evident in the salvation of Simon the Magician,

and that such power would be evident in your life as well.

So I read again,

1 Cor. 2: 4 “my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

And so I preach to you the same gospel as preached by Philip here in Acts 8, the same gospel so well proclaimed by the Apostle Paul in,

Rom. 10:8 “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): 9 that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”