

May 9, 2021 by Steve Brandon



The Pursuit of Spiritual Power

Acts 8:9-25

1. Power for self (verses 9-13)
2. Power from God (verses 14-17)
3. Power for self (verses 18-25)

I learned this week about "The Manhattan Project." I should have learned about it in my history classes. But I didn't (or, perhaps I forgot).

The Manhattan Project was the code name for the research and development of the first atomic bomb. The project got its name from the location where the research began. It began in Manhattan, New York. Plans for the project began in 1939, when the United States Navy spoke with physicist Enrico Fermi to talk about using the power created by uranium for military purposes. That same year, Albert Einstein supported the theory that indeed, an uncontrolled nuclear chain reaction could indeed be employed as a weapon for mass destruction.^[1]

In 1940, the federal government issued a modest grant for research into the atomic bomb, some \$6,000. By 1942, the United States was at war with the axis powers in Europe. The brought a mounting fear that Germany was working on their own nuclear bomb. So, the United States government spared no expense to get an atomic bomb. Eventually, they would spend some \$2 billion to get their bomb, as some 130,000 people would end up working on the project.

Anyway, research began in Manhattan, but soon transitioned to Chicago, where Enrico Fermi had successfully set off the first fission chain reaction. Finally, in 1945, the project came to a culmination in the Jornada del Muerto desert of New Mexico, where the bomb could be tested.^[2] This site was chosen because of its security and safety. It was unpopulated and entirely under governmental control.

They waited for a day of good visibility, low humidity and light winds (to reduce the radiation fallout), when they could detonate "The Gadget" (the nickname of the bomb). On July 16, 1945, the day came. At 5:30am, the "The Gadget" was detonated. It exploded with an energy equivalent to 22 kilotons of TNT. I don't have any frame of reference to understand how much power that is. I only know this: that's a lot of energy. The energy of the explosion was even larger than anticipated. Scientists had predicted the energy of explosion to be only 5 to 10 kilotons of TNT, but the energy created was 3-4 times larger than anticipated.

The explosion was felt over 100 miles away. And the mushroom cloud reached 7.5 miles in the air. One man (Thomas Farrell) who witnessed the power of the explosion said in his official report, ...

The lighting effects beggared description. The whole country was lighted by a searing light with the intensity many times that of the midday sun. It was golden, purple, violet, gray, and blue. It lighted every peak, crevasse and ridge of the nearby mountain range with a clarity and beauty that cannot be described but must be seen to be imagined."^[3]

Several civilians noticed the huge explosion, so the Air Force issued a press release to explain how "A remotely located ammunition magazine containing a considerable amount of high explosives and pyrotechnics exploded. There was no loss of life or injury to anyone."^[4]

Today, the site is a "National Historic Landmark" with an obelisk on the site with a plaque that reads, "Trinity Site - Where the World's First Nuclear Device was Exploded on July 16, 1945." You can visit there today.

Less than a month later, similar bombs were dropped on Hiroshima (August 6, 1945) and Nagasaki (August 9, 1945). These bombs were so powerful that they killed several hundred thousand people. Six days later (August 15, 1945), the Japanese surrendered.

The power of these bombs is difficult to imagine. From the best I can tell, these three bombs (the test in New Mexico, and the two bombs dropped in Japan) are the largest, most powerful thing we humans have ever manufactured. What is alarming is that our modern warheads are 60 times as powerful. It all draws us to prayer.

I tell you all of this because, our text this morning is about power. It's about pursuing power. The United States pursued power in their all-out effort to create an atomic bomb. This morning, we will see the pursuit of power as well. However, we won't see the pursuit of atomic power. We are talking about something far more powerful: spiritual power.

The title of my message this morning is, "The Pursuit of Spiritual Power." This is what we will see in our text. We will see people pursuing power. Some will pursue it rightly. One will pursue it wrongly. This man is the focus of our text: Simon, the magician. His story is told in Acts, chapter 8. So, I invite you to open in your Bibles to Acts, chapter 8.

This morning we will look at verses 9-25. I want to read the text, and as I do, listen for this man, Simon. Listen for the power that he pursues.

Acts 8:9-25

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. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great." And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. 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. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

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

Now 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." But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

Now when they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.

These verses tell a bit more of the story we began last week. Last week we saw the people of God scattered because of persecution. Stephen was stoned to death. Anyone following after Jesus was subject to the same consequences. And so, the Christians scattered. They scattered north and they scattered south. They scattered north to Samaria. They scattered south to Judea. In Acts, chapter 8 we see the results of both places. First to Samaria. Then to Judea.

Last week, we saw Philip come into Samaria. The city welcome what he was saying. Many people believed in Jesus. But the contrast comes in verse 9. We see the sour apple, if you will, of Samaria. His pursuit of power was for himself and for his own profit. My first point is this:

1. Power for self (verses 9-13)

Acts 8:9

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.

We are introduced here in verse 9 to a man named Simon. He is described here as one who had "practiced magic" among the people of Samaria. Now, when you hear "magic," don't think that he was merely a magician, like Harry Houdini or like Penn and Teller. No, I believe that his magic was a big larger than this. He didn't merely perform sleight of hand tricks, where you take an object and make it disappear. No, he was engaged in witchcraft and sorcery, dipping into the demonic world to amaze and astonish. Some have even called this man, not "Simon the magician," but "Simon the sorcerer." God told the people of Israel to avoid such people as this.

Deuteronomy 18:10-12

There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD.

This is the sort of man that we are dealing with here. He was practicing omens and telling fortunes. He was dealing with the dead spirits. This man, Simon was famous in Samaria. In verse 9, we see him drawing attention to himself, "saying that he himself was somebody great" (Acts 8:9). When he performed his sorcery, he would lift his hands and declare, "I am Simon, the great!" as Muhammad Ali did. And the people believed it.

Acts 8:10

They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great."

Here is where you can see my first point. Here is Simon. He is seeking "Power for self." Simon's power wasn't for good. Simon's power was for Simon. He loved the recognition. He fed off of it! People were calling him "The power of God!" This is essentially equivalent to calling him "The Messiah!" The power of God on earth!

Simon wasn't merely a flash in the pan. He wasn't the huckster coming to sell his elixir and then leave town. No, he was a permanent fixture in Samaria.

Acts 8:11

And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic.

We are talking years! Perhaps even decades! "For a long time!" That's why it was so astonishing to all when he believed!

Acts 8:12-13

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. Even Simon himself believed, ...

What an amazing thing! Simon, the sorcerer, believed in Philip's message!

Verse 12 tells us the content of what Philip was preaching. He was preaching "good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ." Philip's message was two-fold: (1) the kingdom and (2) Jesus. The first part is what John the Baptist preached. This is what Jesus preached! They both said, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!" John the Baptist was able to point to Jesus, saying, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Jesus was able to proclaim himself, telling that woman in Samaria, that he was the Messiah! (John 4:26).

But Philip was able to bring greater clarity to this message of the kingdom than John the Baptist or Peter, because he was able to preach Jesus after the cross. "Philip ... preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" (verse 12).

Last week, we saw Philip's message summarized (in verse 5) as this: "Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ" (Acts 8:5). His preaching was all about Jesus. No doubt, Philip preached much like the apostles had modeled to him. He talked about his life and death and burial and resurrection and ascension and exaltation. Perhaps he preached like this:

"The time has come when God has visited his people! He is establishing his kingdom! Turn from your ways and follow the ways of the Lord!"

Jesus of Nazareth, was anointed by God. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him!

But the Jewish leaders hated him. He was exposing their wicked ways, focusing his attention upon their evil hearts and their corrupt religiosity. They killed him, by crucifying him upon a cross.

They buried him, like they do any dead man. Though he was in the ground, God raised him from the dead on the third day and made him appear to his disciples! He ate and drank with them after he rose from the dead.

After 40 days of teaching his disciples, Jesus ascended into the heavens and is now exalted at the right hand of God the Father!

This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by the builders to become the chief cornerstone! And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved!"

This was Philip's message! And many in Samaria believed his message. And they responded like all New Testament believers responded: they believed and were baptized. That's what verse 12 says:

Acts 8:12

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.

This is the response of every New Testament believer. They came to faith in Jesus Christ, believing that he died for their sins. They expressed that faith through the waters of baptism, just like John performed in the Jordan river. People would come and confess their sins. As a sign of their repentance, they were immersed in the water, signifying their cleaning.

So it is with Christian baptism! When people come to believe in Jesus, they confess their faith in him! They are baptized. We are hoping this summer to have a baptism service. For some of you who have come to faith in Jesus, but haven't been baptized. If you are interested in being baptized, please come and talk with me.

In our text, we see many in Samaria being baptized, "both men and women." And even Simon was baptized! Look again at verse 13.

Acts 8:13

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

Here was Simon, the Sorcerer professing his faith in Jesus. Then, he was baptized. As he joined in with the believers, he was amazed at the "signs and great miracles" that were being performed. He knew that they were authentic! They were the real thing! They weren't trickery as he had practiced for years.

Literally, verse 13 says, "seeing signs and great power." And Simon loved these things, because he loved spiritual power! He pursued spiritual power. Now, sadly, Simon was seeking power for himself. This is my first point. And we shall see this again later. Here's my second point:

2. Power from God (verses 14-17)

Acts 8:14-17

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

Somehow, in some way, news reached Jerusalem that those in Samaria had "received the word of God." Now, on the one hand, this was to

be expected. Jesus had told the apostles, who were in Jerusalem, that they would be witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria" (Acts 1:8). And so, when the gospel reached Samaria, there was no surprise.

But, on the other hand, this was a surprise. See, the Jews hated the Samaritans. The Samaritans were seen by the Jews as being traitors. They had betrayed the covenant that God had established with the nation of Israel. God had told the Jews in their dealing with other nations:

Deuteronomy 7:3-4

You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.

But this is exactly what those in Samaria did. When the Assyrians came and conquered the Jews in Samaria, they didn't remain a separate people. No. They intermarried with the Assyrians. Jewish men took Assyrian daughters as their wives. Assyrian men took Jewish daughters as their wives. As a result, the "faithful" Jews viewed them as half-breeds. They were seen as dogs. The Jews hated the Samaritans.

The hatred is hard for us to understand. In some regards, we understand this, as we are living in a time when racial tensions are high: Black, White, Hispanic, Arab. But our tensions are nothing compared with the tensions between the Jews and the Samaritans.

In our day, the phrase, "Black Lives Matter!" is the banner that's spread for all to see. Now (for the most part) in our nation, we say, "Yes! Black lives matter!" But then, we argue the phrase, saying, "Blue lives matter!" and "All lives matter!" And then there is a battle to explain what "Black Lives Matter" really means. That's our nation.

But if there was a sign along the road from Jerusalem to Samaria that said, "Samaritan lives matter!" The Jews of that day would not say, "Yes! 'Samaritan lives matter!' but also 'Jewish lives matter!'"

That's not the discussion in Bible times. When a Jew would see a sign that said, "Samaritan lives matter!" they would say, "No they don't! They don't matter at all! The Samaritans betrayed our nation. And they are under the judgment of God." Perhaps they would quote the same verse I read to you earlier that speaks of the judgment upon those who intermarry with foreign nations: "The anger of the LORD [will] be kindled against [them]."

This anger and hatred is illustrated well in Luke 9:52-55. Jesus had set his heart to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51).

Luke 9:52-54

And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"

Their hatred was so strong against the Samaritans that James and John wanted to consume them with fire from heaven (verse 54). But that was not the heart of Jesus. When this took place, Jesus "turned and rebuked them." (Luke 9:55). Jesus made it clear to them that their attitude was all wrong toward the Samaritans. "And they went on to another village [in Samaria]" (Luke 9:56), where the people would receive him.

The disciples were learning their lesson: "Samaritan lives matter." It was not an easy lesson to learn. We will see them still wrestling with it in Acts 10 and 11 and 15.

At any rate, the apostles sent their representatives to Samaria to see what happened in Samaria: Peter and John (verse 14). May I remind you that this is the same "John" who wanted to call down fire upon the Samaritans. But now he comes in the power of the Holy Spirit. If anything is ever to heal our nation of our racial tensions, it will be the power of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 8:15-17

[Peter and John] came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.

This is a little strange for us. Because, when we believe in Jesus, we receive the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who transforms us: "He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). The Spirit comes upon us and changes us, and we believe. Paul said in Romans 8:9 that having the Holy Spirit is an indication of faith. "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him." So, this little trip that Peter and John took is a bit foreign to us, because what happens today didn't happen back then.

Here's the key: Acts is a book of transition. It is transitioning us from the ways of the Old Covenant to the ways of the New Covenant. One of these ways has to do with the gospel going to the Samaritans. Another one of these ways has to do with the gift of the Spirit. I believe that the apostles came down from Jerusalem to verify that this movement of God in Samaria was indeed the same work of God that was in Jerusalem. Simon Kistemaker says it well, ...

Did Philip have the ability to pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit? Certainly he had the ability, for he himself was full of the Spirit (6:3). However, God sent the apostles Peter and John to Samaria to signify that through the apostles he officially approved a new level of development in the church: adding the Samaritan believers. God confirmed this new phase by sending the Holy Spirit as a visible sign of his divine presence. As he declared his presence among the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, so he affirmed his nearness to the Samaritan believers. [\[5\]](#)

That's why the Samaritans received "Power from God" (my second point). They received the Holy Spirit as an authentication that the gospel in Samaria was the same gospel that was in Jerusalem. This wasn't to be another sect. The church was united. This authentication was powerful.

Though it isn't called "power" in verses 14-17, in verse 19, we see Simon calling it the "power" of God. This leads us to my third point:

3. Power for self (verses 18-25)

In verses 18-24, we see Simon's true heart come out.

Acts 8:18-19

Now 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."

Simon wanted the spiritual power. He was always the guy to amaze and dazzle with his spiritism! And when he saw the power that the gospel brought, he wanted it. He wanted it bad enough that he professed faith and went through the ritual of baptism. Anything to get this power.

Now that he was able to witness the power of the Holy Spirit, Simon wanted that as well. The only way that he knew how to get it was through money. So, he made the offer to the apostles: "I give you cash. You give me the power." This attempt to purchase the Holy Spirit demonstrates how lacking Simon was in understanding grace. He didn't understand that God gives to us freely based upon our faith in Christ. God isn't in the business of us paying for spiritual benefits.

This was the error of the Pharisees, who set up shop in the temple! Pilgrims would travel to Jerusalem with cash in hand to purchase the animals to sacrifice before the Lord for forgiveness of sins. Do you remember what Jesus did? He made a whip of cords and over-turned the tables in the temple. Jesus drove out all the money-changers. He said, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade" (John 2:16).

See, God doesn't need or want your money in exchange for some spiritual favors. No! He gives to us freely, as we trust in him and cry out to him and depend upon him. God gives to beggars, not the wage-earners. The power for the Christian life comes through faith, not money. Peter made this clear, responding just like Jesus did, with a strong rebuke

Acts 8:20-23

But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity."

This is about as confrontational as you can get. Peter said, ...

"Simon! You are so wrong! You thought that you could pay for God's gift! God gives his gifts. He doesn't demand payment. He delights in beggars who ask. You are not right before God. You are simply seeking the power. Your soul will be destroyed! In only hope that your money will perish with you.

So repent! Pray that God may forgive you of this sin! You need to pray because your sin is evident. May the Lord have mercy upon you!"

Simon's response is telling:

Acts 8:24

And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

Rather than repenting, and seeking forgiveness from the Lord, Simon asked Peter to pray for him. Notice that Simon's focus was upon the consequences of sin. "Pray ... that nothing of what you said may come upon me." This isn't a sign of genuine repentance. Genuine repentance will fully admit the sin and fully embrace all of the consequences that come with that sin! Sure, repentance will pray for mercy. But it will be willing to bear God's full and righteous judgment. But false repentance, on the other hand, will focus only upon the consequences of sin. This is what Simon did. He was focused upon the consequences of his sin. Simon, just plain, didn't get it.

If I am asked to pray for others, I can pray. I can pray for your repentance. But I can't change your heart. I can pray for God's mercy. But I can't grant God's grace. But if you pray, it's totally different! God forgives the one who cries out to him with a sincere heart. See, when coming to God, you don't come by proxy. That is, you don't come because of the act of another for you. You come to God when *you* come to God!

Simon stands as a great lesson for all of us. We aren't saved by our profession of faith. We aren't saved by our baptism. Simon did both of these things. We are saved by a heart that genuinely trusts in the Lord Jesus.

Now, with Simon, we don't know how it ended. We aren't told. We are simply told that the apostles turned around and returned to Jerusalem, preaching along the way.

Acts 8:25

Now when they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many

villages of the Samaritans.

I have two final applications.

First of all, let's apply this in our evangelism. Simon ought to teach us to be slow about counting people into the kingdom. I can't tell you how many times I have heard people pray with someone "the sinners prayer" and pronounce them a believer, who will be in heaven forever with us all! This is especially the case if they are baptized! Reports come from the mission field of the great numbers of those who believed and were baptized. Simon would have been included in such a number. But Simon was lost! He was not to be included in the number of converts.

Jesus illustrated this perfectly in the parable of the sower and the seed (see Mark 4:1-9). There was a sower casting his seed upon the ground. The seed fell on various sorts of soils. One soil was hard. Another was stony. Another was thorny. Another was good. Jesus gave the explanation by explaining how the soils were representative of the kinds of souls of people. The hard soul doesn't receive the word at all. The stony and thorny souls receive the word initially and begin to grow. But soon, they wither away, either through lack of depth or through worldly pressures. The good soul will flourish and produce great fruit. Simon's soul was stony or thorny.

When the disciples had difficulty understanding this parable, Jesus said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?" (Mark 4:13). In other words, this is the key parable to all the parables. If you miss this parable, you will not understand the others. Further, you will not understand the nature of the word upon people. You will not understand ministry.

When you share the Scriptures with others, you will get various responses. Some will reject it outright. Others will receive it gladly, but over time will fall away as an indication of their spiritual status. It's only those who continue on who demonstrate them to be genuine. So, in our evangelism, we would be wise to take things slowly. Let time show the genuineness of conversion.

My second application is personal. Are you saved? Or are you Simon? Do you think that your profession is saving you? Do you think that your baptism is saving you?

Do you have this thing going with God? You come to church and are involved and give money and do all that is expected of you from the leaders of the church. With these things do you think that you are saved. It may not be the case. I have heard enough testimonies of elders and deacons being saved. For years they have served the church. But their serving was pursuing power and not expressing their faith. At some point, they come to realize their wrong ways and trust in the Lord!

I'm not naive enough to think that this may be the case with some of you. You may have sought spiritual power through the church for your own means. It may be that you are only religious for yourself. May Simon be a warning to us all. When you pursue spiritual power, pursue it the right way, for the right means.

The power of the Holy Spirit is more powerful than any atomic bomb.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on May 11, 2021 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-first-atomic-bomb-test-is-successfully-exploded>

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manhattan_Project

[3] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinity_\(nuclear_test\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinity_(nuclear_test))

[4] Ibid.

[5] Simon Kistemaker, New Testament Commentary: Acts (p. 300).