

Acts 8:14-25

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/acts/acts-8/acts-814-25/>

Peter and John journey from Jerusalem to pray over the Samaritans, because the Holy Spirit has not yet come into their hearts. When Simon sees the Spirit descend on the believers, he offers Peter money to buy the power to give the Spirit to people. Peter rebukes him sternly, telling him to repent and ask God's forgiveness for his power-hungry request. Simon asks the apostles to ask God's forgiveness for his error.

Word went back to Jerusalem about the Gospel's spread: *Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John.* The apostles were the only believers who remained in *Jerusalem*, while the rest of the church had scattered due to Saul's persecution (v. 1). Some believers must have returned to inform the *apostles* about what was happening with the dispersed church. When *the apostles* learned that the people of *Samaria had received the word of God* and were believing in Jesus, *they sent* two apostles to visit this budding church. *Peter and John* went for a specific reason, to ask God to give the *Holy Spirit* to the Samaritans.

ACCEPTANCE OF THE SAMARITANS

The fact that *John* was one of the apostles sent *down* to Samaria is notable. In Luke 9, he and his brother James had asked Jesus if they should call down fire from Heaven to destroy a Samaritan village for insulting Jesus (and, possibly, due to their prior prejudice toward Samaritans). Jesus responds that He has a better plan for the Samaritans, saying, "the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them" (Luke 9:56). Now we see the change in *John*.

No longer does *John* want to see wrath and destruction on unbelievers. Now he wants to see them saved, he wants to see them being filled with the Spirit, and God working in their life.

Peter and John are said to go *down* to Samaria, even though Samaria is to the north of Jerusalem, because Jerusalem is a city on hills, and is a higher elevation than most of the dwelling places in Samaria, particularly along the coast.

John and Peter arrive in Samaria *and prayed* for the new believers that *they might receive the Holy Spirit*. These are the first believers in Christ since His resurrection who were not fully Jewish. The Spirit *had not yet fallen upon any of* the Samaritans; *they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus*.

While they *prayed* for the Samaritans, *Peter and John began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit*.

The *laying on of hands* in the Bible often signals a priestly transfer of some sort. It transfers guilt in Leviticus 1:4, 3:2, 4:15, etc. In 1 Timothy 5:22 it is a transfer of responsibility. Jesus often physically healed people through touching them (Matthew 8:3).

In Acts 8, this is a unique moment where the Apostles lay hands on people (Samaritans) to receive the *Holy Spirit*. This is not something that “normally” happens. Perhaps this is to show how at this moment in history they were the ones in whom the Gospel had been entrusted. This action and their presence demonstrated the Apostles’ authority given in Matthew 28:18-20 and it powerfully demonstrated that the Samaritans had in fact legitimately received the Holy Spirit with the Apostles approval so that no one could deny or dismiss what was happening among the Samaritans. Perhaps the Apostles’ presence affirmed that the Samaritans had received the Holy Spirit and were just as “in Christ” as the Jews were. There is no distinction between these groups, as had been the case culturally for centuries (Galatians 3:28).

At first glance, it may seem strange that the *Holy Spirit* had *not yet fallen upon any of* these new believers. The following subsections of commentary will attempt to contextualize the state of this generation of the Jewish people. As God’s covenant people, there are several important distinctions in what God required of them for the sake of reconciliation, in contrast to the Gentiles’ reception of the Gospel in later chapters.

THE CURSED GENERATION

For the first nine chapters of Acts, the Holy Spirit does not come upon the Jewish believers until after repentance and baptism. This is because this generation of Jews was under a curse put upon them by Jesus. Jesus repeatedly warned this generation of its unrepentant attitude (Matthew 12:41), and its corruption and faithlessness (Matthew 17:17). Before Jesus’s ministry began, John the Baptizer had begun to try to bring the Jewish people to repentance through water baptism to reject their corrupt leaders (the Pharisees and the Sadducees), to identify themselves again with the Lord God, and prepare themselves for the Messiah, who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11).

In Matthew 23, Jesus pronounces woes and judgment against the leaders of Israel for rejecting Him. He concludes by putting a curse on the Jews of that generation that had rejected their Messiah during His ministry (and would soon reject Him fully by crucifying Him). Jesus’s curse makes them culpable not only for rejecting Him; it also applies to them the guilt of all who had persecuted God’s messengers before Him:

“so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.”
(Matthew 23:35-36)

This curse is in line with the covenant made between God and the Jewish people. When establishing the covenant, God declared that He would bless obedience, and curse disobedience (Deuteronomy 28:1,15). One of the curses promised for disobedience was that God would send a foreign invading army to attack Israel and lay siege to its cities (Deuteronomy 28:49, 52).

In the following chapter, Jesus hints at what the judgement for the current generation will be, while He and His disciples are departing from the temple in Jerusalem:

“Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down.”

(Matthew 24:2)

THE WRATH TO COME

A generation by Biblical reckoning is forty years, just as the Israelites were exiled to the wilderness for forty years so that the old generation (everyone 20 years old and up) would die off, so that a new generation could enter the Promised Land (Numbers 14:28-29). After Jesus’s curse, God gave the Jewish people 40 years to repent of the corrupted Judaism and of killing the Messiah. Jesus began His ministry in 30 AD. Forty years later, the Roman general Titus will besiege Jerusalem in 70 AD and destroy the Temple. According to the historian Josephus, Titus killed 1,100,000 Jews during the siege and ransacking (Deuteronomy 28:49-50, 52).

This was the “wrath to come” which John the Baptist was warning the Jewish people about (Matthew 3:7). It was a temporal wrath, a judgement that would be felt here-and-now for a particular offense. God’s wrath is poured out in many case-by-case instances, due to the particular sins of particular generations or people (to name a few examples: the Flood–Genesis 6:17-18, the Wilderness Exile–Numbers 14:28-29, the Babylonian Exile–Ezra 5:12, or the handing over of individuals to their sinful desires–Romans 1:18,24,26,28)

REPENTANCE AND BAPTISM

Regarding baptism, if a Gentile wanted to become a Jew, one of the requirements was for him to be baptized in water. If a Jew wanted to disassociate from corrupt Judaism, he had to be baptized in water. Both acts were instances of the one being baptized disassociating himself from his old identity (that of being a heathen or of following an incorrect form of Judaism), and identifying thenceforth with God. It was a public show of aligning and allying oneself in submission to God.

The Jews of the generation that rejected the Messiah could not receive the Holy Spirit until they were water baptized. At Pentecost, Peter convicts several thousands of Jews of their guilt in rejecting the Messiah, and they ask what they should do to make it right. Peter tells them:

“Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

(Acts 2:38)

Peter preached this so that they would “Be saved from this perverse generation!” (Acts 2:40) and the coming wrath of God. What they needed to do to make things right was spelled out in this order: repent (reject sin and turn back to fellowship with God), be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (which would identify them as followers of the Messiah and forgive them of their initial sins of rejecting Him), and only then would they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Samaritans, being half Jewish, were under the same curse, thus they first believed, repented, and were baptized, before the Spirit came to them here in Acts 8. There are only four Biblical examples of believers receiving the Holy Spirit after a time delay from their initial belief in Jesus

(Acts 2, 8, 9, and 19). Each of these instances concern Jewish or half-Jewish believers. As such, the Samaritans fell under the curse and needed repentance and water baptism to escape (Acts 2:38-40).

THE GENTILES AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

This is not the case for Gentile believers. Up until this point, Acts makes no mention of Gentiles believing in Jesus. The ministry of the Gospel comes first to the Jews, and now to the Samaritans (Acts 1:8). Peter hoped that if the whole nation of Israel would repent of its rejection of the Messiah, that Jesus might come back and begin His earthly reign (Acts 3:19-21).

In a couple of chapters, the gospel will come at last to the Gentiles. A Roman centurion, Cornelius, and his friends and relations, will believe. He is the prototype of Gentile salvation. But the order of receiving the Spirit is different for Gentiles versus Jews. In the Gentile model, upon faith in Jesus, the Holy Spirit arrives upon the believer. Only afterward are the believers baptized (Acts 10:43-48). Nor is there a requirement for repentance. Why did the Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit the moment they believed? Because they were never under Jesus's curse (Matthew 23:35-36).

The Jews and Samaritans were called toward repentance and baptism to be rescued from the perverse generation and the wrath to come to punish it. Only then were they able to receive the Holy Spirit.

SIMON THE MAGICIAN'S MISTAKE

Here in Acts 8, the Spirit comes to the believing Samaritans after Peter and John pray over them. *Simon* the Magician observes this occurrence. He had once been a celebrated man in Samaria, and is now a believer in Jesus as well. Before Philip the Evangelist came to the city and preached about Jesus, *Simon* was called "the Great Power of God." He performed acts which had once astonished the Samaritans, but Philip arrived and began healing demoniacs and paralytics. Simon was amazed by the genuine miracles. After being baptized, Simon has followed Philip around to observe the "signs and great miracles taking place" (v. 13), almost like an apprentice who wants to learn from a master.

Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, his reaction is to try to gain power. Power he did not formerly have even when he was called "the Great Power of God" in Samaria (v. 10). He apparently did not seek the power of the Holy Spirit, perhaps because he saw that this power was being given to every believer. Or perhaps he actually gained that himself. Rather, he wanted the power to give out the Holy Spirit, which seemed to be an exclusive "power" that the *apostles* had.

He might have seen this as a business opportunity. And he might have gained his magic skills by paying money, so assumed that it would be the same way for this new source of power. It is certainly the way of the world. In his flawed thinking as a magician, he probably saw the Holy Spirit as a spiritist might—a supernatural power that could be controlled, commanded, and

exploited. Though he believed in Jesus, he still has the mental models from his old sorcerer ways of wanting to wield supernatural power. His mind is not yet renewed in this respect.

There was clearly tangible evidence that the Spirit has come upon each believer as the apostles *prayed* for them, because Simon, as a third party observer, could see what they were praying for was really happening. We know the Spirit arrived upon the disciples with loud wind and visible tongues of fire appearing over their heads at Pentecost (Acts 2:2-3). Something similar may have happened here.

Simon, seeing the Spirit fall on everyone who the apostles *prayed* over, approaches them and *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."*

That was how he understood supernatural power to work, that it could be bought. It might be how he received his power to be a magician. He might have reasoned that once he had power to distribute the Spirit, he could restart his career, and charge other people to receive the Spirit.

He completely missed the point. Worse, what he was asking for was evil and destructive. It was fundamentally opposed to God's design. God's grace is freely given. It is already paid for in full by Jesus. One of the main reasons God sends believers the Spirit is so that they have a Helper to lead them toward walking in step with what is best for them, to fulfill God's central law, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (John 14:26). Simon was probably hoping to use the Spirit as a cash register, as he had in the past. He was used to exploiting people by enticing them to buy God's favor and power. In reality, the gift of God's Spirit is just that—a gift. The Holy Spirit indwelling all believers as a guide can't be bought.

The term "simony" originated from this man. Simony is when someone tries to buy a position of power in a church, or some favor from God. The concept of indulgences in the Middle Ages was simony, the selling of God's forgiveness to the poor and illiterate. Simon was trying to purchase his way into apostleship.

Peter replies to Simon's offer with a strong rebuke: "*May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!*" The idea that *the gift of God* could be bought with *silver* is outrageously offensive to Peter. His reply is purposefully harsh, to stamp out even the slightest notion that man can *obtain* the *gift* of the Holy Spirit *with money*. This is worldly, pagan foolishness.

Peter is saying something very radical here in opposition to the culture of the day (and even our day). Anyone who could draw crowds with powers (whether of persuasion, trickery, or Satanic) naturally sought to profit from their status. Even the Pharisees were exploiting the poor of their day (Luke 20:47). Peter, however, is saying, "You and your *silver* should be destroyed, if that's what you care about. Your concept of what matters should *perish*—it should die. You can't buy anything from God. Your *money* is worthless in His Kingdom. It will die *with you*. You don't get to take it to heaven."

Peter had learned this from Jesus Himself, who taught the disciples to earn rewards in Heaven, rather than strive after earthly, fleeting gains:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

(Matthew 6:19-21)

Peter addresses the condition of Simon’s heart, correcting the magician’s priorities: *You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.*

He says this not merely to humiliate the young believer, but to reorient him toward fellowship with God. Simon’s *heart* was clearly *not right before God*, and the first thing he needed to understand was that he had *no part or portion in the matter* of praying for the Holy Spirit to come upon believers in Jesus. This was not Simon’s calling. He was not an apostle. He would not get to share in it. God would not grant him special powers for his own gain. He was completely backwards in his *heart*, in his ambition for worldly prestige.

Peter gives Simon the antidote for the askew state of his *heart*: *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.*

Peter first describes Simon as being *in the gall of bitterness*. Both words, *gall* and *bitterness*, communicate something acidic, burning, distasteful, like bile in the stomach. Peter is telling Simon that he is filled with sin, saturated with corrosion mixed with corrosion. Every believer is given a new nature when they receive a new birth (2 Corinthians 5:17). But they still have their old nature, which Paul calls the “flesh” (Galatians 5:16-17). Peter’s way of describing the “flesh” that Simon is walking in is the *gall of bitterness* and the *bondage of iniquity*.

Peter exhorts Simon to *repent* of this *wickedness*, this desire to purchase power from God. To *repent* (Greek, “metanoēō”) is to change your mind about something. To repent of a sin is to simply decide, “This is wrong, I do not want this, I want to honor God and follow His way.” In context here, this change of mind could include the idea that “I do not want to live as a slave to sin, and gain death, but I want to live as free, and choose life.” Part of this aspect of repentance is to choose a changed view of sin. Rather than viewing sin as “This is in my best interest” Peter exhorts Simon to recognize that living as a slave to sin, giving in to greed and self-seeking, is actually choosing self-destruction. Rather, Peter wants Simon to recognize that the true way to experience life, true life that leads to true fulfillment, is to know God (John 17:3). In this life, the primary opportunity to know God is to know God by faith, which is the path to gaining God’s approval (Hebrews 11:6).

Simon was a young believer, and his means of earning money and attention had been through sorcery. Peter is giving him a loving, stern awakening: if he desires to walk in freedom rather than slavery to sin, he must give up magic, he must give up trying to buy power to exploit people. God has called him to a new life, that gives him a new power to serve people. To serve is

to experience life, and gain freedom from *bitterness, gall, and bondage of iniquity*. Peter is calling Simon to leave behind his life of exploitation.

Peter's instructions are clear: *repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intention of Simon's heart may be forgiven*. Apologize, tell God you were mistaken, your *heart* and its *intention*, its worldly ambition, is wrong. If Simon asks God for forgiveness, then *the intention of his heart* will be *forgiven*. The word translated *perhaps* is most often translated "therefore," "then," or "now." It represents a choice between two alternatives.

The expectation is that if Simon repents, he will be forgiven, and if he does not repent, he will not be forgiven. Peter would have learned this principle from Jesus, as this is the primary point of the Lord's Prayer—we gain forgiveness from God when we ask for forgiveness, and when we have forgiven others ([see commentary on Matthew 6:9-15](#)). However, no one can demand anything from God. So it is always an act of God's mercy to forgive us, making the translation *perhaps* appropriate. God is the judge of the heart.

Peter concludes his rebuke by again emphasizing to Simon the extent of his error, the shabby state of his *heart* and the *wickedness* of his priorities. With God-given insight, Peter sees into Simon's heart, saying, *For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity*.

The *bondage of iniquity* is true of every human, believer and nonbeliever. For the nonbeliever, there is nothing they can do to free themselves from this *bondage*, this slavery to sin. The word *iniquity* (Greek, "adikia") means unrighteousness. To be not right, to be wrong, incorrect, against God's perfect design. Only by believing in Jesus Christ's death and resurrection can we be set free from *bondage* to sin (Romans 6:6). Even though any sin a believer might ever commit has already been nailed to the cross, and forgiven (Colossians 2:14), walking in sin causes us to live as slaves to sin.

For the believer, we are freed, yet our old nature remains. We have been set free from this *bondage*, which leads to death, but we must make the choice to live out our freedom in obedience to God, rather than obey our old sinful nature, if we want to experience life. The Apostle Paul makes this point in Romans 6:16:

"Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?"

Imagine living our whole lives in a cage, and then one day someone breaks the lock and opens the door, so that it can never be shut again. As believers, we face the choice, moment by moment, to leave the cage and live freely. When we choose sin, we are retreating back to that cage, that *bondage*, ignoring the freedom we could enjoy if we would only go outside. When we retreat to the cage, we lose all the opportunities we could have had; the opportunities die.

Paul's argument is simply, "Why would you want to live as a slave (to sin) which brings death, when you are free to choose life?"

This battle between our new nature and our old is ongoing, as Paul spells out in his letter to the Galatians:

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.”
(Galatians 5:16-17)

Simon’s response to Peter’s call for repentance is refreshing. He does not argue, he does not sneer. He reacts, quite rightly, with fear. The fear of God: *But Simon answered and said, “Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.”*

He sees that the apostles are representatives of God, that by their request the Spirit comes down to indwell the Samaritans, and that Peter can see right through him, so he begs that they *Pray to the Lord* on his behalf. He desires their intercession for him. Peter has told him to repent himself, though this could be seen as the first step toward this repentance. Simon is, after all, a brand new believer. He has much to learn and much to unlearn. Simon is at the very least convicted and has dropped the idea of purchasing the power of God. He does not wish to *perish*. In this respect he has an accurate understanding, that sin leads to separation/death. He does not desire to remain in the *gall of bitterness* and in *bondage to iniquity*. He wants *nothing of what Peter said to come upon* him. Clearly he is changing his mind, which is part of what repentance entails.

Simon the Magician does not appear in any other scriptures, so we do not know how his life unfolded. Luke, the author of Acts, leaves us with him surrendering to God in this moment after the apostles confront him. It is an example of the gospel coming to a spiritually-misguided culture, bringing the Holy Spirit to the first believers who are not fully Jewish, and doing away with that culture’s former ways of magic and exploitation. The *gift of God* is free, it cannot be purchased with money. Simon yields to the leadership and instruction of the apostles.

After this rebuke, the apostles make their way back to Jerusalem, but they take their time, preaching about salvation in Jesus along the way: *So, when they had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.* Often Jews would avoid walking through Samaria, in order to avoid being defiled by interaction with the despised *Samaritans*. Here, the apostles intentionally walk through Samaria and are *preaching the gospel to the Samaritans* as they pass through the *many villages* along the road to Jerusalem.

The gospel is spreading, even though Saul and the Pharisees have driven the assembly of believers away from Jerusalem. The apostles have not flinched, but are faithfully obeying Jesus’s commission that they be His “witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Even though Samaria was culturally offensive, the apostles obeyed, and did not leave it out. In this they were walking in God’s way, for God shows no partiality (Deuteronomy 10:17; Acts 10:34).

This story of Simon the Magician began with Philip the Evangelist being the instrument of his conversion (Acts 8:13). Philip has work yet to do in the following verses. It seems he went back

to *Jerusalem* with the apostles, *preaching the gospel to the many villages* along the way, because in verse 26, he is told by an angel to journey down the road from *Jerusalem* to Gaza, which implies that *Jerusalem* was his starting point in the section that is to follow.

Biblical Text

¹⁴ Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent 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 upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹ saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone 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 no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. ²² Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³ For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity."²⁴ But Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."²⁵ So, when they had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.