

Was Simon the Sorcerer a Saved Man?

(Acts 8:9-24)

Arguments in Favor of Simon Being a Saved Man

The strongest argument in support of Simon being a saved man is found in Acts 8:13 where we are told that "Simon himself believed also; and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip." This man believed and was baptized. Other Samaritans believed and were baptized (Acts 8:12), and we have no reason to doubt their salvation.

Since faith is the one condition for salvation (Acts 16:30-31), it is assumed that Simon the Sorcerer must have been a saved man.

Arguments Against Simon Being a Saved Man

1) Not all faith is saving faith. There are different kinds of belief.

Here are some examples:

A. Luke 8:13 speaks of a temporary faith, of people who "for a while believe." The faith that is spoken of here is qualified. It is a "for a while" faith or a temporary faith. There is a difference between genuine saving faith and faith that is spurious and short-lived.

It's important to realize that the stony-ground hearer was in that condition from the start. When the seed was scattered, it did not first fall on good ground, which at a later time became stony and bad. The ground was stony and bad from the start. It was never good ground. There were never any roots. The rock ledge was there from the beginning. This is contrary to the teaching of some who say that at the beginning everything was fine and that the person truly believed on the Lord Jesus, and that this faith was good and valid. It was not good and valid. Even from the very beginning this faith had no roots. Even from the beginning the conditions were not suitable for a good reception of the Word.

Thus Walvoord says that "the seed on shallow ground pictured superficial reception of the Word" (*Matthew*, page 99). Ryrie pointed out that some believers think that "carnality can be lifelong and so total that carnal believers will never bear any fruit and yet be genuinely saved. But that is not true, for all believers will bear fruit, some thirty-, some sixty-, and some one hundred-fold (Matthew 13:8). Otherwise, they do not possess the new life" (*So Great Salvation*, p. 59).

Arno Gaebelein speaks of the rocky ground: "It is the great class of professing Christians. They are covering over this old, desperately wicked heart with a little earth. They put on the form of godliness, while they know nothing of its power. There is also a great deal of enthusiasm, a springing up of the seed; it looks almost as if there is to be a great result—but alas! There is only the name to live, but

death is behind it" (*Matthew*, p. 272-273). Gaebelein thus taught that the "stony ground" hearer represented an unbeliever. F.W. Grant in his *Numerical Bible* takes the same position.

Homer Kent taught the same (see his *Matthew commentary in Wycliffe Bible Commentary*). Here is what L.S. Chafer said about this parable (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. III, page 296): "Whatever seeming reality may be attached to the experience of those who are represented by that which fell by the wayside, or by seed that fell in stony places, or by seed that fell among thorns, the determining test is that these did not mature into wheat, as did the seed which fell into good ground.... That Word does move many superficially, but those who are saved by it are likened to wheat." He describes the other three types of ground (hard, stony and thorny) as "the three failures." See also William Kelly's discussion of the Luke 8 passage in *The Gospel of Luke*, pages 125-126.

B) 1 Corinthians 15:2. Some believe, but they don't hold fast to the gospel which Paul preached. Paul describes this type of faith as being "in vain." They believed in vain. Their belief falls short of saving faith. "The Apostle is not implying that some of the Corinthian believers were lost for want of faith; rather it is that their faith has never been sufficient for salvation" (Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. III, page 296).

C) John 2:23. "There were many who "believed in His Name when they saw the miracles which He did." [Compare Simon's fascination with the miracles of the apostles in Acts 8:13.] Was this saving faith or did it come short of saving faith? It was a faith based on miracles which they saw. This faith, which was based on miracles, came short of saving faith for two reasons: 1) Even though they believed in Him, He did not believe in them (same verb used)! He did not commit himself to them (v. 24). He knew what was in them. He could see right past their shallow faith. 2) One of these people who had a faith based on miracles was Nicodemus (3:1-2): "We know that thou art a teacher come from God; for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him." This faith that he had did not measure up to saving faith. The Lord told him he must be born again.

D) John 8:31. Jesus spoke to those Jews who believed on him. Is this describing saving faith? Perhaps it is, but this passage has always puzzled me. In verse 33 who does the "they" refer to? It must refer to people who heard him say, "The truth shall make you free" because they took up on this and said, "We were never in bondage to any man." But as you read verses 33-44 it is obvious that these are unsaved Jews who were very antagonistic to Christ ("ye are of your father the devil" etc.). If we say that those in verse 31 were true believers, then how do we explain the following context? Homer Kent sees this same problem: "This raises the question of whether it was true saving faith....No clear transition can be seen here between different groups of Jews....Apparently the sense is that these who believed in Jesus had come to a sort of mental acceptance, but not to any personal trust" (*Light in the Darkness*, page 126).

6) James 2:14-26 speaks of a "dead faith" which is fruitless and of demons "who believe and tremble." James makes the point that a true believer will demonstrate his faith by his works. Charles Ryrie said it this way:

James 2:24 ["Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only"] is the reply to the question of James 2:14. Unproductive faith cannot save, because it is not genuine faith. Faith and works are like a two-coupon ticket to heaven. The coupon of works is not good for passage, and the coupon of faith is not valid if detached from works" (*Ryrie Study Bible*, comment under James 2:24).

In thinking about “dead faith” it is helpful to connect this with the “dead works” mentioned in Hebrews 6:1 and 9:14. “Dead works” are works flowing from the flesh which is stamped with death, by which one seeks to establish himself before God. Such works never had “life,” or were not once alive and then “died”—but have always been “dead” (without life or spirit). Likewise the same can be said of “dead faith” (James 2), which is of mere human origin, flowing from the flesh which is stamped with death. Such “faith” never had “life,” or was not once alive and then “died,” but has always been “dead” (without life or spirit). “As the body without the spirit [without life] is dead, so faith without works [without life] is dead” (James 2:26).

Conclusion: When the Scripture says that Simon believed, it is possible that his faith was deficient and was not genuine saving faith. The Acts 8 passage clearly points to the fact that Simon was greatly impressed and believed because of the miracles that were performed (much like the “believers” in John 2:23 who, like Nicodemus, believed in the miracles but were not born again). John Rutherford describes the faith of Simon in this way: “It is an indication of the nature of the faith which he possessed in the gospel—wondering amazement at a new phenomenon not yet understood, not repentance or trust in Christ” (*The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, Vol. IV, page 2796).

2. Simon did not understand salvation or the grace of God.

From the very beginning Simon did not understand salvation and did not understand the grace of God. He thought God’s gift could be purchased with money (Acts 8:18-20). Simon, as a sorcerer, had great power over people (Acts 8:9-10) and he wanted to continue to have such power in the Christian realm. He seemed to be envious of the way God was using the apostles (Acts 8:18-19). He did not demonstrate the broken and contrite spirit of a man who was simply thankful to be a sinner saved by grace. He demonstrated a fear of judgment (Acts 8:24), but no genuine repentance. He was told to repent of his wickedness (Acts 8:22), but there is no indication that he ever did.

3. The words of Peter seem extremely harsh and strong for anyone but a wicked unbeliever (Acts 8:20-23).

“But Peter said unto him, Thy money **perish with thee**, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. **Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter:** for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity” (Acts 8:20-23, emphasis mine).

"Thy money perish with thee"—this implies that Simon was going to perish. Literal translation: "Thy silver be with thee into perdition." When does the Bible ever describe a true believer as one who is going to perish? Compare 1 Corinthians 1:18; 2 Corinthians 2:15.

"Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter"—Peter had just been talking about God’s gift of salvation, and if Simon had no part in that he must be unsaved.

Peter was given great discernment by the Lord to understand the true heart of Simon (even as Paul was later given discernment to understand the heart of Elymas the sorcerer, Acts 13:6-11).

4. What we learn about Simon from church history.

Although the Bible only devotes part of one chapter to this man, the Church Fathers (Justin Martyr, Jerome, Origen, Irenaeus, etc.) had much more to say about him. Their writings described his heretical views and his self promotion. He is known in history as Simon Magus, “magus” being a term which means sorcerer or magician. We are more familiar with the word in its plural form, “magi,” as a description of the wise men. Simon had followers called “Simonians” and they held certain Gnostic errors. Many consider Simon to be one of the chief originators of Gnosticism. Philip Schaff wrote, “The author, or first representative of this baptized heathenism, according to the uniform testimony of Christian antiquity, is Simon Magus, who unquestionably adulterated Christianity with pagan ideas and practices, and gave himself out, in pantheistic style, for an emanation of God” (*History of the Christian Church*, Volume 1, page 566). In the legends about Simon he is seen as being in constant opposition to the Apostle Peter. In other words, he was not known for being a friend of the church.

Simon and his sin is immortalized in our vocabulary. The word “simony” indicates the crime of buying or selling a spiritual office for a price in money.

5. What Bible students have said about Simon the Sorcerer.

C. I. Scofield, in *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*, agrees that Simon was a mere professor, not a genuine possessor. In the final chapter of this booklet (“Believers and Professors”) Scofield has this heading: “BELIEVERS ARE SAVED, MERE PROFESSORS ARE LOST.” The first example he gives of a mere “pretender” is that of Simon.

Dr. John Whitcomb in his audio series on the book of Acts (35 messages, available from the Middletown Bible Church at minimal cost), taught that Simon was a believer much like the believers in John 2:23. Like Nicodemus they believed because of the miracles which they saw, but they were not born again.

Homer Kent observed, “In all likelihood his belief (8:13) was only superficial and not true saving faith, as the following reasons indicate. (1) His belief seems to have been based upon the miracles which he beheld (vs. 13), and could be mere intellectual assent. Jesus usually discounted that kind of faith (John 2:23-25; 6:26,66). It is true that the same word is used for “believe” of Simon and the rest of the Samaritans, but the context must indicate the content of the belief. (2) Simon is contrasted to the others throughout the account. (3) The particular type of rebuke given to Simon makes it doubtful that he was saved. “Thy silver be with thee into perdition” (literal translation). “Thou has neither part nor lot in this matter.” “Thy heart is not right.” The expression “gall of bitterness and bond of iniquity” was OT terminology descriptive of most serious offenses (Deut. 29:18,20). (4) Simon exhibited no personal sense of sin, but only a fear of judgment. (5) The consistent testimony of church tradition associates Simon Magus with heresy” (*Jerusalem to Rome*, p. 80).

F. F. Bruce: “The nature of his [Simon’s] belief must remain uncertain. No doubt it was sincere as far as it went, but was very superficial and unsatisfactory. Jesus Himself, we are told in John 2:23f., attached little value to the faith that rested on miracles alone” (*The Book of the Acts*, p. 179).

Arno C. Gaebelein wrote of Simon's total misunderstanding of salvation:

"Thy money perish with thee!" The sorcerer with his wicked heart thought that the Gift of God could be purchased with money. In this the aim was the Gospel itself. Salvation and all that is connected with it, including the Spirit, is the Gift of God, without money and without price; it cannot be earned nor bought. He had no part nor lot in this matter. And this is true of all who in the depravity of their hearts think of obtaining the power of God by what they do. He sees himself uncovered and exposed "in the gall of bitterness and bond of iniquity" in spite of his outward profession, his baptism and association with Philip. (*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 152).

Charles Ryrie's brief comment in his *Study Bible* under Acts 8:13 is of interest: "*Simon himself believed also*. Peter's denunciation in verses 20-23 indicates that Simon's faith was not unto salvation (James 2:14-20)."

Harry Ironside: "We see in Simon a baptized man, a religious professor, who had not been regenerated" (*Acts*, p. 107, and see also his earlier discussion on page 106).

John Phillips: "Simon's faith was spurious from the start He was not won by Philip's message but by Philip's miracles. He 'believed,' it says. But *what* did he believe? Whatever it was he believed, it did not regenerate his soul. He was as lost after he 'believed' as he was before he 'believed,' as the sequel of the story makes clear...What Simon Magus coveted was not the Master but the miracles, not the Savior but the signs" (*Exploring Acts*, page 152-153).

William MacDonald: "It seems that Simon had not been born again. He was a professor but not a possessor" (p. 1605). MacDonald continues:

"Peter's answer indicates that Simon was not a truly converted man: 1. **"Your money perish with you."** No believer will ever *perish* (John 3:16). 2. **"You have neither part nor portion in this matter"**; in other words, he was not in the fellowship. 3. **"Your heart is not right in the sight of God."** This is a fitting description of an unsaved person. 4. **"You are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity."** Could these words be true of a regenerate person? (*Believer's Bible Commentary*, p. 1606).

Conclusion

Although the Scripture clearly says that Simon "believed," everything else that Acts 8 tells us about this man indicates that his faith did not reach the level of saving faith. He believed because of the miracles which he saw, but he did not believe to the saving of his soul.