

A Faith That Does Not Save

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Turning the World Upside Down / Faith; Salvation; Sign; Miracle; Amazement; Heart / Acts 8:9-25

Acts 8:9-25 teaches us about a faith that does not save.

Introduction

Years ago, I read a story about the famous outlaw Jesse James (1847-1882).

He killed a man in a bank robbery and, shortly after that incident, professed faith in Jesus and was baptized at the Kearney Baptist Church in Kearney, Missouri (the church where his father had once served as pastor).

Then he killed another man, a bank cashier, and joined the church choir and taught hymn-singing.

He liked Sundays, but he didn't always show up for worship.

On two Sundays, he robbed trains.

Now, what are we to make of such a profession of faith?

Did Jesse James have a faith that saved him?

Or did he have a faith that did not save him?

How can we distinguish between a true faith and a false faith that does not save?

Today's sermon will answer those questions by looking at a faith that does not save.

We learn about such a false faith in the narrative about Simon the Magician in [Acts 8:9-25](#).

Luke's purpose in telling us about Simon the Magician is to give us a warning.

It's a warning for people who miss the point of signs and miracles.

The simplest way I can think of illustrating what went wrong with Simon is an experience every mother of toddlers has had.

Suppose you have a one-year-old child sitting on your lap, and suddenly, in the window, there is a beautiful bird, and you hold out your hand to point at the bird and say, “Look, look at the bird.”

What does the child look at?

He looks at your hand and the sign you are making with your fingers. He might even imitate the sign by putting out his index finger. He sees the sign. He is excited because you are excited. He joins in, imitating the sign as best he can.

But the problem is that he never sees the bird.

The whole point of the sign is missed.

That is what happened to Simon the Magician in [Acts 8:9-25](#).

He saw the signs that Philip was doing. They were better than his magical signs. He got excited about them. He followed Philip around and wanted to imitate them.

But he never saw the bird in the window.

He never saw what the signs were pointing to.

He never saw Christ.

He never saw the horror of his sin, the need for repentance, and the glory of Christ in the gospel, who forgives and makes new and clean.

Scripture

Let's read [Acts 8:9-25](#):

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. 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.” ¹¹ And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. 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. ¹³ Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

¹⁴ Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to 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 on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹ saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone 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 neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. ²² Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³ For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." ²⁴ And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

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.

Lesson

[Acts 8:9-25](#) teaches us about a faith that does not save.

Let's use the following outline:

1. There Is a Faith That Does Not Save (8:12-13, 18-23)
2. The Object of a Faith That Does Not Save Is the Sign (8:9-11)
3. The Experience of a Faith That Does Not Save is Amazement (8:9, 11, 13, 22)
4. The Root of a Faith That Does Not Save Is a Bad Heart (8:21)

I. There Is a Faith That Does Not Save (8:12-13, 18-23)

First, there is a faith that does not save.

There is a belief that does not save, even though it rises in the presence of faithful preaching and miracles.

Luke tells us in verse 12 that Philip **“preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ.”**

“Signs and great miracles” accompanied Philip’s preaching (verse 13b).

So, Philip, the evangelist, preached the word of God faithfully and performed great miracles in Samaria.

Luke tells us in verse 13a that **“even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip.”**

But then something happens that shows this “belief” to be false.

The apostles come down and lay hands on the Samaritans so that they receive the Holy Spirit.

Then Luke tells us in verses 18 and 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.’ ”**

But Peter rebuked him and said, **“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”** (8:20-23).

This means that Simon was not truly converted.

He has no part or lot in this matter of Christ. His heart is not right with God. He still needs to repent. He is still enslaved to bitterness and sin. He is still in his sin and not yet converted.

This is confirmed by the entire tradition of the early church that says Simon went on to become a heretic and was not a faithful Christian (cf. Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Jerome, etc.).

And yet you remember that Luke says in verse 13a, **“Simon himself believed.”**

My point is that there is a “faith” or a “belief” that does not save, even though it rises in the presence of faithful preaching and great miracles.

This same thing is found in [John 2:23-25](#), for example: “Now when he [that is, Jesus] was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. [Notice the similar setting to Philip’s signs in Samaria.] But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.”

This “faith” or “belief” was not genuine, and Jesus could see into people’s hearts and knew it wasn’t.

The same kind of “faith” is seen in the parable of the four soils.

In [Luke 8:13](#), Jesus describes the second soil, “And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away.”

This faith is not true saving faith.

Paul taught the same possibility in [1 Corinthians 15:1-2](#) when he said, “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.”

There is such a thing as “believing in vain.”

James called it a “useless” faith or “dead” faith ([James 2:20, 26](#)).

So I conclude that Luke’s point in [Acts 8](#) is that Simon’s “faith,” his “belief” (described in v. 13), is not a saving faith but a false faith, a faith that is vain, useless, and dead.

That’s the first step in Luke’s warning.

There is a faith that does not save, and it can rise in the presence of true preaching and true miracles.

Of course, the question is: “How can we discern if we have a faith that does not save?”

That leads to the second step.

II. The Object of a Faith That Does Not Save is the Sign (8:9-11)

Second, the object of a faith that does not save is the sign.

The object of Simon’s faith—the thing he believes—is the sign and not Jesus.

Simon was a magician.

That means he dealt with supernatural power before he heard Philip preach or heard of Jesus.

He used his magical arts for a long time in Samaria. He amazed the people, as we read in verses 9-11, **“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.”**

Simon knew real power when he saw it.

So when Philip came to town and not only preached but also performed signs by healing people and casting out demons ([Acts 8:7](#)), Simon knew the power was real and stronger than his own.

So he was ready to switch sides. He even tried to buy the power with money because he wanted it badly (v. 18).

So, the object of his faith was the power of signs and miracles.

This is what he believed: he believed that Philip was an honest miracle worker.

He saw real power in what Philip did by the signs and great miracles that Philip did.

Simon did not doubt it. He was not a skeptic.

He was ready to leave his magical arts to join Philip and use this new power.

Philip stretched out the finger of signs and miracles to point to Jesus, and Simon fixed his eye on the finger.

Simon believed in the sign. He wanted to be able to tell like that. He would pay money to point like that.

But he never turned his head to look at Jesus.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, crucified for sinners, risen in power, reigning over a humble and holy people, was *not* the object of Simon's faith.

And therefore, it was not true saving faith.

What was it?

III. The Experience of a Faith That Does Not Save Is Amazement (8:9, 11, 13, 22)

Third, the experience of a faith that does not save is amazement.

Simon's experience of "faith" was simply amazement—amazement at Philip's signs, not brokenness for sin and not humble trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Look at how Luke makes this plain to us.

He uses the word "amaze" three times.

In verse 9, he says that Simon "**amazed**" the people of Samaria with his magic.

In verse 11, he says again that Simon "**amazed**" them for a long time with his magic.

Then, in verse 13b, after Philip had shown the power of God, Luke says of Simon, "**And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.**"

In other words, Simon was now experiencing what his magic had been producing in the Samaritans, namely, "amazement" when he saw Philip's miracles.

Friends, mere amazement at supernatural power is *not* saving faith.

Believing that supernatural power is present and being amazed by it so much that you want it is not an experience of true faith.

Verse 22 points to what was missing.

Peter tells Simon, **“Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.”**

What was missing was a heartfelt recognition of his sinfulness, a turning to Jesus in repentance, and a broken and humble trust for forgiveness.

Amazement about signs and great miracles is *not* saving faith.

Signs and miracles are the finger pointing to Jesus.

True faith comes when we see the glory of God in Jesus's face.

Looking at the finger of power can give us all the spiritual experiences possible.

But until we turn to Jesus, there will be no true faith.

IV. The Root of a Faith That Does Not Save Is a Bad Heart (8:21)

Finally, the root of a faith that does not save is a bad heart.

The root of Simon’s false faith is a bad heart.

Philip said to Simon in verse 21: **“You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.”**

At the root of Simon’s false faith was a heart problem.

And that is the way it is with every one of us.

His heart was not right before God; it was bad. It was wrong. It was crooked.

Simon’s heart needed to be changed.

A bad heart shows itself in many ways.

Speaking of the sinful nature—which is synonymous with a bad heart—Paul says to the Galatians in [Galatians 5:19-21](#): “Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and

things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

Simon the Magician was not a simple one-year-old sitting on his mother’s lap staring innocently at her pointing finger instead of out the window.

He was a man with a bad heart who willfully suppressed the knowledge of the true God, whose Spirit cannot be bought.

He fixed his attention on Philip’s finger of power because deep down, he still wanted to be a great power broker, just like it says in verse 9b—“**saying that he himself was somebody great.**”

Conclusion

So there it is.

Luke’s warning to us is this: there is a faith that does not save.

Its object is the power of supernatural signs and wonders, not Jesus and the glory of his grace.

Its experience is amazement, not brokenness for sin, and humble trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

And its root is a bad heart.

Now, I plead that we do not misapply the warning.

In previous messages, I noted that the purpose of signs and miracles was to point people to Christ.

These signs were temporarily given to the apostles and their close associates, such as Philip, to authenticate themselves as God’s messengers and their message as God-given.

Now that God’s revelation has been written down in the Scriptures, we no longer need such extraordinary signs to authenticate the word of God.

But to say that is still to miss the warning.

Luke warns us that we must look beyond the sign to the reality.

And the truth, of course, to which the sign is pointing is Jesus.

Jesus, the Son of God, and the Savior of sinners, is the only one who can save us from our sins and misery.

Our danger is putting our faith in our experiences, abilities, other people (such as the priest or the pope or the minister or so on), or even our faith. By that, I mean that we mistakenly think that if we only have enough faith, then Jesus will save us.

Friends, I need to say this as clearly as I can.

Only Jesus saves, delivers from sin, takes us to heaven, is our righteousness, and pleads our case before God the Father.

If we put our trust in anyone or anything else besides Jesus, we are doomed.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith ([Hebrews 12:2](#)).

Many years ago, a submarine was rammed by another ship and quickly sank off the Massachusetts coast.

Although rescue was impossible at that depth, a diver was dispatched to determine if there was still life aboard the disabled vessel.

The diver placed his helmeted ear against the sub's hull and heard a faint tapping sound of Morse code.

He noted the dots and dashes carefully and decoded the question: "Is... there... any... hope?"

He slowly signaled back, with great concern: "Hope... in... Christ... alone."

The diver got it right.

There is hope in Christ alone—hope for that trapped submariner, hope for you, and hope for me.

I urge you today to place your faith in Christ alone. Amen.