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Was Simon the Sorcerer Saved? (And Why it Matters!) (Acts 8:4-24)

Pastor Gene Giguere, August 23, 2026

Introduction: The Story So Far ...

- 1) Now, last time we began looking at the subject of deserved suffering after a long – and admittedly punishing – study of deserved suffering! We won’t be on this quite as long, but wear taking a bit of a side road as we approach the subject.

We started by looking at *The Strange Case of Simon the Sorcerer*. Simon is a wonder, and, apparently a wonder worker – astonishing people with his miraculous demonstrations of power – whether real or fraudulent. We find his story in Acts 8, where the Church has been harried out of Jerusalem by persecution; only the Apostles have remained there.

Philip, one of the Deacons chosen in **Acts 6:5**, headed ‘down’ to Samaria (**Acts 8:1–5**). Perhaps the fact that he was a Grecian Jew made him less prejudiced than the regular Jews who despised the Samaritans.¹ Samaria is north of Jerusalem, but Luke tells us that Philip “went down” because Samaria is lower in elevation than Jerusalem is.

The Samaritans reject all of the Jewish Old Testament except the Pentateuch (the first five books of Moses, or the Torah). They also have an alternative ‘holy mountain’ than do the Jews – they believe that Mount Gerizim is the sacred place chosen by God for worship (**John 4:20**), NOT Mount Zion/Jerusalem.

Now comes Philip preaching the true Gospel of Jesus Christ! And the result was miraculous!

¹ Toussaint, Stanley D., “Acts,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. by J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), II:372.

“The crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. ⁷ For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸ So there was much joy in that city” (8:6-8).

This is great, but for a very long time, Samaria had been under the psychological and spiritual sway of another man. His name was Simon – he’s often called Simon Magus or Simon the Sorcerer. We meet him in verses 9 through 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.”

Luke says he “practiced magic.” This translates the present active participle of a single Greek word, **μαγεύω**: he’d made a career of sorcery. In the ancient world, a **μάγος** could refer to anything from an astrologer to a Persian priest. But a **μάγος** can also refer to an out-and-out fraud, a cheat, a huckster. And it seems most likely to me that Simon was a charlatan who practiced magic for personal gain.

One thing’s for sure, though: he did astonish people with whatever he did! Whatever Simon was working at, it was effective!

- 2) We saw that Simon was a great self-promoter; he liked to tell people “that he himself was somebody great” (Acts 8:9b). And, you know what? *They totally bought into the image he’d cultivated.*

Verse 10-11 says, “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.”

That’s pretty amazing: they gave him a semi-divine title! They called him “the Great Power of God” (ἡ δύναμις τοῦ θεοῦ). To them, *he was the physical embodiment of God’s power on earth.*

And here's the thing: he *liked* the stage; he *loved* the applause; he *treasured* the intoxicating feeling of being seen as an elite conduit of supernatural, God-like power. They saw him as someone great, and they paid attention to him because he'd dazzled them for a very long time (**Acts 8:11**).

But Simon's powers—whatever they were—paled in comparison to the 'real' power of Philip's miracles! So much so that Simon the 'amazer' was himself 'amazed' by what Philip was doing through the power of God the Holy Spirit. He recognized that Philip was operating in *true power*, not trickery or illusion.

And so, the true Gospel arrived with Philip. He began preaching Jesus to them and backing it up with manifestations of true divine power. God was performing signs through him. Demonic spirits came flying out of people *screaming!* **Acts 8:7** says, "Unclean spirits [πνεύματα ἀκάθαρτα, *demonic entities*], crying out with a loud voice [*screaming!* βοῶντα φωνῇ μεγάλῃ], came out of many who had them."² Furthermore, those who were "paralyzed" or "lame" (crippled) were healed.

And what was the result? JOY! Pure joy! That's what happens when the Gospel arrives! Verse **8** simply says, "So there was much joy in that city!"

- 3) Verse **12** gives us the result of Philip's evangelism: "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."

But hold the phone! Verse **13**, shockingly, says this: "Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed."

This is an important verse that we will return to. But, to continue the story, the Apostles in Jerusalem caught wind of what was happening in Samaria!

"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."

² Schnabel, Eckhard J., *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Expanded Digital Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), pp. 406–7.

As soon as the Apostles laid their hands on these new Samaritan believers, the Holy Spirit fell upon them with Pentecost-like visible manifestations (**Acts 8:14–17**, matching **Acts 2** and **Acts 19**).

4) But that’s when Simon’s old ways of thinking rushed in like a flood!

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.”

✠ Simon stood watching this from the sidelines and he knew he was witnessing *real* power! And when Simon saw this ritual that brought the Holy Spirit down upon these believers, decades of occultic programming and the lust for attention returned. He offered them “money” to buy an apostolic office. He was asking Peter and John (of all people!) to give him the authority to dispense the power of the Holy Spirit!

✠ Envy arose within Simon! He wanted his old crown back; he wanted to be ‘somebody great’ again. He missed being called “the power of God” (**Acts 8:10**). And here, he makes a VERY big mistake!

And this, friends, is where we left off. Simon is about to get laced by Peter!

The Terrifying Apostolic Rebuke (Acts 8:20-25)

1) So, what happened next?

²⁰ 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.”

Peter’s response is immediate, terrifying, and razor-sharp! Some commentators – ancient *and* modern – go so far as to say Peter is condemning Simon to hell forever! They interpret the Apostle Peter’s words in **Acts 8:20** (“May your silver

perish with you”) as a curse of eternal damnation – an anathema – which consigned Simon to hell without the possibility of salvation.

- ✠ The very respected J.B. Phillips, in his famous translation of the New Testament, renders Peter’s rebuke as, “To hell with you and your money!”³ He explicitly added a translator’s note stating that these words are exactly what the original Greek means: that εἰς ἀπώλειαν literally means, ‘destruction’ or ‘perdition.’
- ✠ The Good News Translation (GNT) renders the text as, “May you and your money go to hell ...”
- ✠ R.C. Sproul, the beloved Bible teacher and respected theologian, argues in his sermons (and in his commentary on Acts) that Peter placed an anathema upon Simon. An anathema is the strongest possible apostolic curse of judgment.
- ✠ But he’s in good company! Even early Church Fathers like Justin Martyr and Irenaeus did not view Simon as a saved man. They solidified his legacy as the permanently-condemned “father of all heresies,” arguing that he apostatized after Peter’s curse.⁴
- ✠ We see this view of Simon represented in medieval art and Cathedral iconography. For instance, the stone base at the west door of Peterborough Cathedral in Cambridgeshire, England, depicts, in accordance with traditional medieval ecclesiastical art, Simon Magus being cast into hell by Peter.
- ✠ The scene carved into the stone base shows Simon being plunged headfirst into hell. His body is sharply contorted to show his rapid, violent descent.⁵
- ✠ Surrounding the falling sorcerer are two grotesque, deeply-carved, medieval demonic Tormentors who claw at him, dragging him down into the underworld.

³ Phillips, J.B., *The New Testament in Modern English*, *ad loc.* C. S. Lewis wrote the introduction to his translation of the epistles!

⁴ Cf., <https://makinghistorynow.wordpress.com/2022/04/17/a-4th-century-christian-novel/>;

⁵ See Julian Luxford’s paper, ‘The Figure Sculpture of the West Front of Peterborough Cathedral and its Setting’;



✝ Serpents wind around his feet.⁶

✝ But Simon's upside-down positioning serves a brilliant double purpose in medieval art.

First, it represents Simon's sudden spiritual downfall from the heavens – he has turned his life up-side-down by his sin of trying to purchase apostolic authority.

But it also reminds us of Peter himself, the cathedral's patron, who was famously crucified upside down out of profound humility. And so, Simon's upside-down posture echoes the posture of Peter in his martyrdom.

Trevor Saxby writes: “At the west door of Peterborough Cathedral ... the visitor is greeted by this graphic medieval pillar base. It depicts St. Peter conquering the magician, Simon Magus, who had offered him money if he would empower him to transmit the Holy Spirit like the apostle did (**Acts 8:9-24**) ... The strategic placement of such a sculpture at Peterborough was a statement: *as you enter these holy precincts, abandon all thought of selfish human gain.*”⁷

2) These are some strong opinions indeed! But what does *the Text* actually say?

✚ The Greek phrase “May your silver perish with you” uses the word ἀπώλεια, which speaks of *destruction* or *ruin* or even *annihilation*.⁸ But this does not have to refer to *eternal* ruin; Peter may be issuing a warning of temporal, physical judgment in time if Simon refused to repent.

We see this in the case of Ananias and Sapphira in **Acts 5:1–11**. They lied to the Holy Spirit and dropped dead in their tracks. But there is no indication that they lost their salvation! **1 John 5:16** tells us in plain language that there is a “sin that leads to death”—which refers to the physical death of a backslidden believer who refuses to respond to God's warnings to repent.

https://pure.st-andrews.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/252077137/Luxford_2018_BAACT_FigSculpturePetCath_AAM.pdf

⁶ See University of Oxford conference item: ‘What is the subject carved on the socle in the West doorway of Peterborough Cathedral?’, <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:ec8f41ba-1820-4130-8d02-8dc0117a180a>

⁷ Saxby, Trevor, ‘Simon the Magician: The Making of a Popular Early Church Villain,’ *Mining for Gold*, April 17, 2022; <https://makinghistorynow.wordpress.com/2022/04/17/a-4th-century-christian-novel/>

⁸ Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 127.

✚ When Peter says Simon “You have neither part nor lot in this matter,” the phrase “in this matter” (ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τούτῳ) literally means “in this word” or “in this ministry.” In context, Peter seems to be saying that Simon is disqualified from sharing in the Church’s leadership or in the Apostolic ministry of dispensing the Spirit because his “heart is not right before God” (**Acts 8:21**). There’s no indication at all that the “part nor lot” Peter is talking about refers to *salvation*.⁹

✚ Peter is clear that Simon’s heart is not right. He urges him to repent. But how many times has *your* heart not been right since *you* were saved? Can we all be honest and say, ‘*Too often!*’ This echoes the warning of **Galatians 6:7**: “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.”

Simon is self-unaware. So, Peter tells him to “pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.” Peter is saying, ‘Ask God to show you what’s in your heart so that He might forgive you!’ But why would Peter instruct a man he’s just consigned to hell or anathematized to repent and pray?

When Jesus condemned those who had just committed the “unpardonable sin” (**Matthew 12:22-32**), He said: “Whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (**Matthew 12:32b**). He did *not* ask them to repent or pray! So, what’s going on here? What are these teachers and exegetes seeing that I am not?

✚ Finally, Peter says, to Simon, “I see that you are in the gall [poison] of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.” Being in “the gall of bitterness” (χολὴν πικρίας) is an image that draws from **Deuteronomy 29:18**, which warns

⁹ Eckhard Schnabel is very helpful here: “The key word for the interpretation of verse 21a is the term translated as “matter” (λόγος); the demonstrative pronoun (τούτῳ) indicates that λόγος here does not mean “word” in terms of the Christian message but refers to the “matter” of the bestowal of the gift of the Spirit, which is the substance of Simon’s request. Peter asserts that Simon has not “part” (μερίς) or, what amounts to the same, no “share” (κλήρος) in conveying the Spirit. Peter does not argue that Simon can have no part in bestowing the Spirit, perhaps implying this is the prerogative of the twelve apostles (cf. 1:17, 26, where the term “share” [κλήρος] is used for the apostolic ministry). He points to Simon’s defective relationship with God, not to his non-apostolic status. Luke’s words do not take back the force of his description of Simon’s conversion in v. 13. While it is true that if believers are not on guard about their actions or attitudes, they may still “perish” (ἀπώλεια); this term does not necessarily mean “the opposite of salvation” but could mean the kind of instantaneous death that Ananias and Sapphira suffered (5:1–11).” Schnabel, Eckhard J., *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Expanded Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), p. 414.

against a root that bears poisonous and bitter fruit.¹⁰ It is a metaphor for extreme spiritual toxicity, specifically poisonous resentment and bitter envy. Simon was envious of the Apostles' superior clout and power. But harboring envy proves you are *backslidden*, not that you are *unsaved*.

Being in the “bond of iniquity” (σύνδεσμον ἀδικίας) simply speaks of being shackled, chained, or tightly bound by *an old sinful habit*. Simon was caught in a transgression (**Galatians 6:1**). He was under the pressure of his ‘old man’ to slide back into his old addiction to pride and the lust to be famous. It mirrors **Proverbs 5:22**: “The iniquities of the wicked ensnare him, and he is held fast in the cords of his sin.” But Paul gives us hope! He reminds us that true believers can fall hard but can still “escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will” (**2 Timothy 2:26**).

- 3) So, what is Peter doing here? I and many other Bible teachers see what’s called the ‘spiritual doctor analogy’ in play here. I see Peter acting like a spiritual doctor diagnosing a fast-moving, deadly infection. This is because of Luke’s choice of words. He chose to use the Greek word **χολή**, translated here as “gall” – something extremely unpleasant to the taste, very bitter; it refers to the “bitter fluid secreted by the liver” – in other words, *bile*.¹¹

However, **χολή** can be, *and is*, translated (in the LXX) “poison.” “In the LXX, **χολή** renders the Hebrew expressions for bitterness, gall, and poison (cf. **Job 16:13, 20:14; Proverbs 5:4; Lamentations 3:15**).”¹² **Psalm 68:22** says, “They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.” The word translated “poison” there in the Greek LXX is **χολή**. And I think that’s the way Peter is using it here.

In **Acts 8:23**, it is being used metaphorically by Peter to describe Simon’s profound moral corruption and poisonous envy. And so, Peter acts like a doctor diagnosing a fatal condition. He looks past Simon's outward actions and examines his heart! And what he finds there is a dangerous infection of greed and pride that will ruin his spiritual life if he doesn't stop immediately. That’s Dr. Peter’s diagnosis! He essentially says, ‘Simon, I see you are fast approaching –

¹⁰ True Christians are explicitly warned in Hebrews 12:15 to “see to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.”

¹¹ ESV margin note.

¹² Balz, Horst Robert, and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 470.

and heading right into – a state of absolute spiritual toxicity. You are being poisoned by pride and greed and the lust for attention. Stop right now! Repent and pray, before God takes your physical life!’

4) And finally, Simon’s response.

Peter says, “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” (**Acts 8:22-24**).

Now, that’s kind of a weird thing for an unbeliever to ask, no? A number of scholars and Bible teachers – such as Paul Enns and J. Vernon McGee – point out that Simon doesn’t mock. He doesn’t show defiance, as an unbeliever might.

Rather, his response reminds me of the children of Israel in the wilderness crying out to Moses after they’d been bitten by fiery serpents (**Numbers 21:7**):

And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.” So, Moses prayed for the people.”

It seems to me that Simon recognizes Peter’s apostolic authority and trembles in fearful, submissive respect before him. He seems to be submitting to the parental discipline of the Almighty God in accordance with **Hebrews 12:5–6** (cf., **Proverbs 3:11–12**)

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.

For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”

Do you know what this sounds like to me? It sounds like repentance! And with that, we never hear from Simon again.

The Big Question

- 1) Now all of this raises a big question. Because there's a debate that churchmen and theologians, scholars and preachers have debated for (literally) millennia! Here it is: *Was the so-called Simon Magus, Simon the Sorcerer, saved?* Is he, could he possibly be, our brother in Christ?

Historically, the answer churchmen have given has been an unequivocal, 'NO!' Preachers like Dr. John MacArthur look at these verses and say, 'No, Simon's faith was false. It was superficial. It was just intellectual head-knowledge driven by a love for magic. He was the first false convert.' MacArthur taught that Simon Magus was a prime example of a false convert who had a superficial belief that did not lead to true regeneration. In fact, he calls him the 'first false convert' of the Church.¹³ MacArthur contrasts genuine saving faith with superficial reactions to the gospel. He maintains that Simon's outward profession and baptism did not equal a changed heart.

✠ He says plainly: "The study of Simon the Sorcerer illustrates faith that does not save."¹⁴

✠ He judges Simon's character and motives: "Simon had a very high view of himself and a very low view of God. He did not understand the glory of the Holy Spirit. He didn't know that nothing that God has is for sell [sic]. All that He offers is free, but it's to the broken, contrite heart, repentant and truly believing in Christ."¹⁵

✠ MacArthur concludes that Simon's attempt to purchase apostolic authority shows he was still in the "gall of bitterness" and the "bondage of iniquity," proving his faith was merely intellectual or emotional rather than life-giving.¹⁶

Now, I have great admiration for Dr. MacArthur and I'm not picking on him. I'm using his view to illustrate what I would call the majority view of Simon the Sorcerer throughout the two-thousand years of Church history.

¹³ MacArthur, John, Sermon: 'The First False Convert,' April 19, 2015; <https://www.gty.org/sermons/44-29/the-first-false-convert>.

¹⁴ MacArthur, John, Sermon: 'The Faith That DOES NOT Save,' January 14, 1973; <https://www.gty.org/sermons/1726/the-faith-that-does-not-save>

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, MacArthur, 'The Faith That DOES NOT Save'.

¹⁶ MacArthur, John, Sermon: 'The First False Convert,' April 19, 2015; <https://www.gty.org/sermons/44-29/the-first-false-convert>.

- 2) Why would Dr. MacArthur take such a strong position on Simon's salvation? Frankly, because *he had to*. Dr. MacArthur was beholden to a theological concept called *Lordship Salvation* – a false understanding of the Gospel that makes no real distinction between salvation and discipleship.

He taught that 'true saving faith' requires a personal surrender to Jesus as Lord, which naturally produces an obedient life and good works as the necessary fruit of salvation. John Piper and R. C. Sproul teach essentially the same thing.¹⁷ In his book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, MacArthur argues that Jesus cannot be accepted merely as a "Savior" from hell while rejecting Him as "Lord" and master of one's life.¹⁸

But we believe that *the Bible makes a sharp distinction between salvation and discipleship*. We're saved – honestly and truly – the moment we believe that Jesus died for our sins. Then, as we grow under the Holy Spirit's mentorship, we become disciples – disciplined students and followers of Jesus Christ bearing good fruit consistent with our salvation.

But believers can (and do!) backslide – lose their way, so to speak. And when they do, we have contrition, confession and repentance to allow us to recover from our folly. If we're so unwise as to reject this means for restoration, there comes divine discipline or deserved suffering.

I don't know if you've ever noticed that 'discipline' has the word 'disciple' in it! God uses divine discipline as a good Father to make disciples, not believers!

Well, soon after the release of *The Gospel According to Jesus* (the first edition was published by Zondervan in 1988), a number of scholars quickly published books in response. Prominent Bible teachers and professors associated with *Dallas Theological Seminary*—such as Zane Hodges and Charles Ryrie—strongly challenged MacArthur's view with the far-more biblical "Free Grace" position.

¹⁷ Cf., "Lordship Salvation"; <https://learn.ligonier.org/guides/lordship-salvation> & 'Letter to a Friend Concerning the So-Called "Lordship Salvation"; <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/letter-to-a-friend-concerning-the-so-called-lordship-salvation>.

¹⁸ Woodyard, Jonathon, 'Does Dead Faith Save? John MacArthur responds to that question with lucid brevity,' August 4, 2025; <https://theologyalongtheway.org/2025/08/04/does-dead-faith-save-john-macarthur-responds-to-that-question-with-lucid-brevity/>

Dr. Zane Hodges had already published, *The Gospel Under Siege* (1981), which questioned whether ongoing obedience was a requirement for genuine salvation. And, *Dead Faith: What Is It?* (1987), which examined how the book of James balances faith and works.

But when *The Gospel According to Jesus* landed, he immediately shot out his book, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (1989). This book was written specifically in direct response to John MacArthur's defense of Lordship Salvation and in my opinion decimates his arguments.

As if that weren't enough, the very same year – 1989 – Dr. Charles Ryrie published his response to *The Gospel According to Jesus*, called, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe in Jesus Christ*. In this fine book, Dr. Ryrie dismantled virtually all of the claims raised by proponents of Lordship Salvation.¹⁹

Essentially, these scholars maintain that the call to follow Jesus as Lord and Master is a secondary call to *discipleship*, which is an optional or later level of commitment, not a requirement to receive eternal life. Hodges (in *Absolutely Free!*) and Ryrie (in *So Great Salvation*) insist that adding surrender, submission, or turning from sin to the Gospel message turns faith into a *work*, thereby compromising salvation as a completely free gift. They argued that a true believer can experience a prolonged period of unfaithfulness or disobedience (they can become 'carnal Christians') while still retaining their eternal security based entirely on their initial moment of faith.²⁰

So, why would Dr. MacArthur take such a strong position on Simon's salvation? Frankly, because *he had to*. His theological presuppositions rendered it impossible for him to admit that Simon could have been saved. Simon proved by his actions that Jesus was not his Lord. When he offered to purchase an apostolic office, it was a clear indication to proponents of Lordship Salvation that Simon was not bearing the fruit indicative of true salvation!

- 3) But Macarthur is not alone! In fact, he's in VERY good company! The early Church Fathers presented numerous legends which painted Simon as nothing

¹⁹ See Nash, Ronald, 'The Controversy Over Lordship Salvation,' C.S. Lewis Institute, May 20, 2009; <https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/the-controversy-over-lordship-salvation/>

²⁰ See Rochford, James, 'Lordship Salvation,' *Evidence Unseen*; <https://evidenceunseen.com/theology/salvation/lordship-theology>

short of a super villain on par with Lex Luther or the Joker! If we stop reading the Bible and step into the pages of these writers, we find that a virtually unanimous, fiercely negative view of Simon presents itself. They did not see a carnal brother; they saw an occult fraud and the literal “fountainhead of all Christian heresies.”

The great Justin Martyr, in his First Apology, claimed that after this rebuke, Simon doubled down on his occult powers.²¹ Justin claimed that he traveled to Rome during the reign of Claudius Caesar, performing mighty acts of demonic magic and that he was so successful there that the Roman senate honored him with an official statue on the Tiber River inscribed with the words *Semoni Sanco Deo* (‘To Simon the Holy God’). He claimed that he traveled with a former prostitute named Helena, whom he claimed was the “First Thought” (*Ennoia*) generated by his divine mind.

Irenaeus of Lyons, in his monumental work *Against Heresies*, named Simon Magus as the ultimate root, the father, of Gnosticism.²² Irenaeus wrote that Simon

²¹ “And, thirdly, because after Christ’s ascension into heaven the devils put forward certain men who said that they themselves were gods; and they were not only not persecuted by you, but even deemed worthy of honors. There was a Samaritan, Simon, a native of the village called Gitto, who in the reign of Claudius Cæsar, and in your royal city of Rome, did mighty acts of magic, by virtue of the art of the devils operating in him. He was considered a god, and as a god was honored by you with a statue, which statue was erected on the river Tiber, between the two bridges, and bore this inscription, in the language of Rome: — *Simoni Deo Sancto*, To Simon the holy God. And almost all the Samaritans, and a few even of other nations, worship him, and acknowledge him as the first god; and a woman, Helena, who went about with him at that time, and had formerly been a prostitute, they say is the first idea generated by him. And a man, Menander, also a Samaritan, of the town Capparetæa, a disciple of Simon, and inspired by devils, we know to have deceived many while he was in Antioch by his magical art. He persuaded those who adhered to him that they should never die, and even now there are some living who hold this opinion of his. And there is Marcion, a man of Pontus, who is even at this day alive, and teaching his disciples to believe in some other god greater than the Creator. And he, by the aid of the devils, has caused many of every nation to speak blasphemies, and to deny that God is the maker of this universe, and to assert that some other being, greater than He, has done greater works. All who take their opinions from these men, are, as we before said, called Christians; just as also those who do not agree with the philosophers in their doctrines, have yet in common with them the name of philosophers given to them. And whether they perpetrate those fabulous and shameful deeds — the upsetting of the lamp, and promiscuous intercourse, and eating human flesh — we know not; but we do know that they are neither persecuted nor put to death by you, at least on account of their opinions. But I have a treatise against all the heresies that have existed already composed, which, if you wish to read it, I will give you.” Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, Chapter 26.

²² “Doctrines and practices of Simon Magus and Menander. 1. Simon the Samaritan was that magician of whom Luke, the disciple and follower of the apostles, says, But there was a certain man, Simon by name, who beforetime used magical arts in that city, and led astray the people of Samaria, declaring that he himself was some great one, to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This is the power of God, which is called great. And to him they had regard, because that of long time he had driven them mad by his sorceries. Acts 8:9-11 This Simon, then — who feigned faith, supposing that the apostles themselves performed their cures by the art of magic, and not by the power of God; and with respect to their filling with the Holy Ghost, through the imposition of hands, those that believed in God through Him who was preached by them, namely, Christ Jesus — suspecting that even this was done through a kind of greater knowledge of magic, and offering money to the apostles, thought he, too, might receive this power of bestowing the Holy Spirit on whomsoever he would — was addressed in these words by Peter: Your

claimed *he* was the true supreme God who appeared as the Son among the Jews, the Father in Samaria, and the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles. His followers, the Simonians, built a cult that integrated Christian concepts with raw paganism, worshipping statues of Simon modeled after Jupiter.

Now, ancient sources are not silent about how Simon died either! Perhaps the most famous story comes the *Apocryphal Acts of Peter*.²³ (This is the story about Simon which is most often presented in Christian art. Notice the images cycling as I speak.) In this story, Simon fell to his death while attempting to fly in Rome during the reign of Emperor Nero. Simon was attempting to prove his divinity to Nero by executing a levitation miracle. He built a high wooden tower and, using dark magic and aided by invisible demonic spirits, he launched himself from a tower and began careening through the air over the Roman Forum. Well, the Apostle Peter was there watching this. Incensed at Simon's demonic deception, he knelt down in the midst of the crowd and prayed aloud, commanding the demons who were holding him up to drop him! The demons fled, causing Simon to plummet to the earth, shattering his legs "in three parts." He died from his injuries.

Now, what's interesting is that this story emerges many times in Church writings.

✠ In Arnobius' (c. A.D. 300) retelling, Simon doesn't die from his fall.²⁴ Rather, after falling and breaking his legs, he was carried away to another place where, overcome by shame, he threw himself from a roof to his death.

money perish with you, because you have thought that the gift of God can be purchased with money: you have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God; for I perceive that you are in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity. He, then, not putting faith in God a whit the more, set himself eagerly to contend against the apostles, in order that he himself might seem to be a wonderful being, and applied himself with still greater zeal to the study of the whole magic art, that he might the better bewilder and overpower multitudes of men. Such was his procedure in the reign of Claudius Cæsar, by whom also he is said to have been honored with a statue, on account of his magical power. This man, then, was glorified by many as if he were a god; and he taught that it was himself who appeared among the Jews as the Son, but descended in Samaria as the Father while he came to other nations in the character of the Holy Spirit. He represented himself, in a word, as being the loftiest of all powers, that is, the Being who is the Father over all, and he allowed himself to be called by whatsoever title men were pleased to address him." Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, Book I, Chapter 23.

²³ Stoops, Robert F., Jr., *The Acts of Peter* (Early Christian Apocrypha series, Polebridge Press, 2012). The primary apocryphal source for this story is the late 2nd century document, *The Acts of Peter*. This offers us the earliest and most detailed account of the showdown. (*Actus Petri cum Simone*, Chapters 30–32, extant in the Latin *Codex Vercellensis*).

²⁴ Arnobius, *Against the Heathen*, 2.12.

✠ Cyril of Jerusalem told his version in A.D. 346 in one of his *Catechetical Lectures*.²⁵ In his retelling it was not only Peter who prayed, but Peter and Paul. And Simon fell from ‘a chariot’ drawn by demons and crashed to the earth and died instantly as a “mangled corpse.”²⁶

✠ *The Golden Legend*, a medieval compilation, states that Simon’s flight was interrupted by the prayers of Peter and Paul, resulting in him breaking his neck and head.²⁷

But my favorite account of Simon’s death was related by Hippolytus of Rome in, *Refutation of All Heresies*.²⁸ Simon apparently commanded his disciples to bury him alive, promising to resurrect on the third day. But, rather than rise, Jesus-style, he suffocated to death in the trench.

Origen, writing in *Against Celsus*, also mentions Simon’s attempts to eclipse Jesus and how he failed. Origen writes that his followers dwindled to almost nothing worldwide because the truth of the Gospel had dismantled his magical deceptions.²⁹

²⁵ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 6.14.

²⁶ See the fine article by St. George William Joseph Stock in the 1911 edition of *The Encyclopædia Britannica*; https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/1911_Encyclop%C3%A6dia_Britannica/Simon_Magus.

²⁷ *The Golden Legend*, compiled by Jacobus de Voragine, c. A.D. 1260. See the section in de Voragine, ‘Feast of Saints Peter and Paul.’

²⁸ “The disciples, then, of this (Magus), celebrate magical rites, and resort to incantations. And (they profess to) transmit both love-spells and charms, and the demons said to be senders of dreams, for the purpose of distracting whomsoever they please. But they also employ those denominated Paredroi. And they have an image of Simon (fashioned) into the figure of Jupiter, and (an image) of Helen in the form of Minerva; and they pay adoration to these. But they call the one Lord and the other Lady. And if any one among them, on seeing the images of either Simon or Helen, would call them by name, he is cast off, as being ignorant of the mysteries. This Simon, deceiving many in Samaria by his sorceries, was reproved by the Apostles, and was laid under a curse, as it has been written in the Acts. But he afterwards abjured the faith, and attempted these (aforesaid practices). And journeying as far as Rome, he fell in with the Apostles; and to him, deceiving many by his sorceries, Peter offered repeated opposition. This man, ultimately repairing to ... (and) sitting under a plane tree, continued to give instruction (in his doctrines). And in truth at last, when conviction was imminent, in case he delayed longer, he stated that, if he were buried alive, he would rise the third day. And accordingly, having ordered a trench to be dug by his disciples, he directed himself to be interred there. They, then, executed the injunction given; whereas he remained (in that grave) until this day, for he was not the Christ. This constitutes the legendary system advanced by Simon, and from this Valentinus derived a starting-point (for his own doctrine. This doctrine, in point of fact, was the same with the it Simonian, though Valentinus) denominated under different titles.” Hippolytus, *Refutation*, Book VI, Chapter 20.

²⁹ “There was also Simon the Samaritan magician, who wished to draw away certain by his magical arts. And on that occasion he was successful; but now-a-days it is impossible to find, I suppose, thirty of his followers in the entire world, and probably I have even overstated the number. There are exceedingly few in Palestine; while in the rest of the world, through which he desired to spread the glory of his name, you find it nowhere mentioned. And where it is found, it is found quoted from the Acts of the Apostles; so that it is to Christians that he owes this mention of himself, the unmistakable result having proved that Simon was in no respect divine.” Origen, *Against Celsus*, Book I, Chapter 57.

And, finally, it was Augustine, centuries later in his tract, *On Heresies*, who used Simon's name to permanently define "Simony" as the sin of buying or selling church leadership offices, pointing back to **Acts 8** as the ultimate warning to the clergy.³⁰

- 4) So, what do we do with all of this? Well, modern biblical scholars and historians have looked closely at these dramatic accounts of the Church Fathers and they've come to view them all with what we might generously call extreme skepticism. Modern critical scholarship widely considers these patristic accounts of Simon Magus to be legendary polemics and useful tools for warning early Christians against the dangers of dabbling in the occult.

For instance, the claim that Simon was the 'the First Gnostic': Modern historians have constructed a timeline for Gnosticism and have demonstrated that true Gnosticism did not structurally emerge until the 2nd century A.D. under teachers like Valentinus. This dismantles Irenaeus's timeline. They found that 2nd-century Gnostics adopted a mythologized Simon as a mascot, but that the Church Fathers mistakenly reversed the timeline, projecting 2nd-century Gnostic ideas back onto the 1st-century Simon.³¹ This is an anachronistic error.

³⁰ In Augustine's tract, *The First Heresies*, he begins with the Simonians, named after Simon Magus, who appears in Acts 8. Augustine repeats the ideas that Simon taught that he himself was the supreme divine power and that a woman named Helena whom he kept as a companion was the first conception of his mind, through whom all things were made. He claimed that she had descended through the angelic powers into successive human bodies, had suffered indignities in the world, and had finally come to rest in the form of Helena, a prostitute from Tyre. Simon presented his relationship with her as a kind of divine rescue, and his followers practiced magical arts and worshipped images of Simon and Helena under the names of Jupiter and Minerva. Summarized from 'Thetelos: On Heresies'; <https://thetelos.org/on-heresies-de-haeresibus-ad-quodvultdeum-augustine-of-hippo/>.

³¹ Abstract of Haar, Stephen Charles, PhD Thesis, The University of Queensland, 2002: 'Simon Magus: The First Gnostic?': "According to Hippolytus, the third century CE Christian writer, a certain Simon of Samaria had himself buried alive by his followers, with the promise to rise on the third day; yet he remained in the grave because he was not the Christ (Hippolytus, Ref. VI 20,3). Even though Simon was unable to rise from the dead, he has continued to enliven the imaginations of those who investigate the beginnings of Christianity. He has been the focus of controversy since the second century CE when Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons, identified him as the "father of all heresies." From that time until the nineteenth century there is almost unanimous testimony that Simon was the first individual to be called a Gnostic, and that Simonianism was the earliest form of Gnosticism.

Modern historical criticism cannot claim such a consensus of opinion. In fact, conclusions about Simon range from agreeing with the assessment of Irenaeus to denying Simon's existence. These contradictory opinions reflect the nature of surviving primary sources and the fact that in modern research the person of Simon has been only a secondary concern in the quest for answers to larger questions.

This thesis first re-examines the literary portraits of Simon of Samaria (chapters 2-3) through the background debates of scholarship concerning the historical reliability of Acts, and the nature and origin of Gnosticism. Then a chronological approach to the agreed primary sources critically analyses reports about Simon. Particular attention is given to the possible contribution of "magic" and the history of the "Magoi" in both the development of Gnosticism, and the perceptions and descriptions concerning Simon.

Justin Martyr was mistaken too about the supposed ‘Roman statue’ which the Senate erected to Simon. In 1574, archeologists in Rome excavated the exact base stone Justin described on the island in the Tiber River. The inscription did not read, ‘To Simon the Magician’ at all; it was dedicated to Sancus, the ancient Roman pagan god of trust and oaths (it read: ‘*Semoni Sanco Deo Fidio*,’ ‘to the semi-god Sancus, the god of fidelity’). Justin had misread the monument and mistakenly attributed it to Simon.

The “thought” and “bonds” error: In **Acts 8:22–23**, Peter tells Simon that the **ἐπίνοια** (*epinoia*, thought or intent) of his heart is wrong and that he is in the **σύνδεσμος** (*syndesmon*, bond). These were standard Greek terms used to describe an attitude and a moral state.³² But, in *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus claims Simon taught that a woman named Helena was his own divine **ἐπίνοια** (‘Thought’) who fell into lower realms and was trapped (**δεσμός**) in a succession of female bodies.³³ This seems to be a convenient attempt to reposition these general

Reports about Simon in early Christian literature were undoubtedly fueled by the reported encounter between the disciple Simon Peter and the so-called "magician" Simon in the New Testament book of Acts. The story-teller Luke initially avoids negative statements about Simon, but as his narrative unfolds in Acts 8 it is clear that Simon is not described as a hero; in fact, Simon's reported claims and title most probably would have first struck Christians as rivalling those of Jesus Christ. The reputation of Simon is examined (chapter 4) and claimed links between Simon and other practitioners of arcane arts are discussed in three separate analyses of texts from the book of Acts.

Previous scholarship can largely be divided into one of two camps that hold mutually exclusive conclusions about Simon; namely, either he was a Gnostic hero discredited and demoted by the author of Acts as a Samaritan magician, or an ordinary magician who was later elevated and revered as a divine figure. Claims about Simon being the first Gnostic are examined (chapter 5) together with a discussion of issues surrounding the use of terminology such as Gnosis and Gnosticism. Arguments are presented for the earliest descriptions of Simon as "magician" and "Gnostic" being complementary rather than contradictory assessments. Several fragments from reports about Simon in the writings of Justin, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus are critically examined as a prelude to providing an answer to the focal question: "Simon Magus: First Gnostic?"

The study concludes in agreement with modern estimations of "identity". The identity of Simon never existed as some inherent quality - always presenting the same face to researchers in every generation - but was generated in interaction with others, through the simultaneous contribution of a complex mix of cultural, sociological, psychological, and geographical factors. The question of Simon's identity is approached from three perspectives (chapter 6): from the Messina definition of Gnosticism; the viewpoint of the Christian Heresiologists; and, from a select number of reconstructed original traditions of Simon.

Was Simon the first Gnostic? The thesis outlines why a simple "yes" or "no" answer regrettably cannot be given. From the viewpoint of Messina, Simon can be seen as a pre-Gnostic in terms of the definition. From the viewpoint of the Heresiologists, Simon can be seen as a heretic and a practitioner of ancient magic, who was influenced by Greek philosophy and entertained certain nascent Gnostic ideas. From the viewpoint of reconstructed traditions, Simon would not have rejected the idea of being called a Gnostic; at least not in the original sense of the word” (<https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:106048>).

³² Cook, Stephen R., ‘Acts 8:9-24 - Simon the Magician,’ Thinking on Scripture,’ Jul 12, 2023; <https://windowwalker.podbean.com/e/acts-89-24-simon-the-magician/>

³³ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, Book I, Chapter 23.

biblical terms into a specific theological jargon for the purpose of further scandalizing a person he saw as wicked and heretical.

It seems likely the Church Fathers took the vocabulary of Peter's rebuke and wove it into a literal, biographical mythology.

Conclusion: Back to the Bible!

- 1) So, was Simon the Lex Luther of the New Testament – the unsaved, wicked nemesis of Jesus and the Apostles? Or was he a believer, young in his faith, who lost sight of the truth for a bit? Well, to answer that question let's go back to the Bible! And let's have the humility to take the Holy Spirit at His literal Word.

I believe that the clear testimony of Scripture is that Simon was justified by faith alone in Christ alone and was saved. Therefore, he was eternally secure in Jesus. Luke tells us that he believed, and Jesus promised: “whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (**John 5:24**).

Furthermore, he was obedient to enter the waters of baptism (**Matthew 28:19**) at a time when it was dangerous to do so. And beyond that, he apparently became a faithful student of Philip by ‘continuing’ with him (ἦν προσκατερώων τῷ Φιλίππῳ) – language which is indicative of a dedicated disciple. The word προσκατερέω means ‘to attach one’s self to someone or something.’³⁴

Simon was saved, but he was also a spiritual infant – and we have all been there. We see this because his eyes were still locked onto the *mechanics of supernatural power* rather than the beauty of transforming grace. He was a baby in the same way that all believers who seek after signs, wonders and miracles are babies.

We’ll look more closely at this – and move on to deserved suffering – next time.

³⁴ Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 881.

Aside: ἐν (en) vs. εἰς (eis)

- 1) There's a point I'd like to make by way of exegesis, that I think is important to getting to the full power of what Peter is saying here.

In the ESV, Peter says to Simon, you are “in the gall of bitterness.” In the Greek, the word “in” would be represented by the preposition ἐν (en). But the Greek Text of verse 23 uses a different preposition, εἰς (eis).

εἰς fundamentally means ‘into’ or ‘toward.’ It’s clumsy in the English, but Peter is literally saying something like, ‘Simon, you are INTO the gall of bitterness.’

- 2) Now, I don’t want to get into the weeds here, but there is an important grammatical shift between ἐν and εἰς. And the distinction has to do with spatial rest and active motion. What I mean is this:³⁵

ἐν is a *static* preposition. It describes, for instance, simply being ‘in a box’ or ‘in a room.’

εἰς is a *dynamic* preposition (which requires the accusative case). It always implies direction, penetration, or movement *into* something.³⁶

If Peter wanted to say Simon was simply ‘a Christian who happened to have some lingering bitter thoughts,’ he likely would have used ἐν. By choosing to use εἰς, Peter is indicating that Simon has transitioned or plunged forward, into an entirely different sphere of reality.

He is basically saying, ‘Simon, I can see that you have plunged into the depths of bitterness and you’re now completely consumed by it!’ It was the *motion* of his greed in trying to buy the Holy Spirit that had propelled him *into* this toxic environment.

³⁵ See ‘The Greek preposition εἰς (an important key to unlocking difficult Bible truths)’; <https://bibletruths.org/the-greek-preposition-eis-an-important-key-to-unlocking-difficult-bible-truths/>

³⁶ Daniel B Wallace in his grammar ‘Beyond the Basics,’ page 369, lists eight uses of εἰς with the accusative: *Spatial* (into, toward, in) *Temporal* (for, throughout) *Purpose* (for, in order to, to) *Result* (so that, with the result that) *Reference/Respect* (with respect to, with reference to) *Advantage* (for) *Disadvantage* (against) *In place of* ἐν (with its various nuances). Wallace then devotes no less than a page and a half (most unusually in this book) to the examination of the single use of a single word, namely εἰς in Acts 2:38.

- 3) Because of his use of εἰς instead of ἐν, Peter's rebuke evokes the terrifying image of a person who hasn't just *swallowed* poison, they've been *submerged* 'into' [εἰς] *a vat of venom!* It paints a picture of total saturation.

Because of the use of this single reposition, we see Simon the Sorcerer being plunged *into* a state of bitter venom and bondage, rather than merely being located statically within its boundary. Simon's entire worldview, his ambition, and his heart are steeped *into* envy and resentment because he wanted the Apostles' power to use for his own personal clout, for his own self-aggrandizement.

- 4) And so, the ESV translation – “I see that you are in the gall of bitterness” – misses this dynamic completely. But look at how some other translations try to capture the essence of εἰς.

✚ New Living Translation: “I can see that you are full of bitter jealousy and are held captive by sin.”

✚ Berean Standard Bible: “I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and captive to iniquity” (also the HCSB).

✚ GOD'S WORD Translation: “I can see that you are bitter with jealousy and wrapped up in your evil ways.”

And so, our ESV misses it all together, but:

The Berean Standard Bible captures the active effect of being put *into* the venom: “you are poisoned by bitterness”, and

GOD'S WORD Translation does a nice job of capturing the immersive, engulfing nature of εἰς: “you are ... wrapped up in your evil ways.”

Personally, I'd translate verse 23, “For I see you are plunged into the poison of bitterness and the shackles of sin.”

- 5) Ultimately, εἰς in Acts 8:23 stands as *a very a severe warning*. It tells us that Simon's request wasn't a minor slip-up. He was moving in a dangerous transformative direction, driving himself straight *into* the grip of spiritual catastrophe!