

MEET THE MAGICIAN

(Context: Acts 8:5–25.)

Samaria was abuzz. Philip's proclamation of Christ had resulted in the expulsion of unclean spirits and the healing of paralytics. The power of God had set the city rejoicing. Even the esteemed magician, Simon, was baptized and became a follower of Philip. Who wouldn't want to be part of an amazing discipleship program like that? (Acts 8:5–13)

One thing was missing, though. The power of God at work through Philip hadn't yet come upon the new believers. So, the apostles in Jerusalem sent Peter and John to pray for an impartation of the Holy Spirit. As the apostles laid hands on members of the Samaritan church, they received the Spirit. So far, so good. Many branches of today's church recognize belief in Jesus, and baptism in water and the Spirit, as the first steps into the Christian life. However, Simon the magician tried to take a shortcut. He saw the effect of the Holy Spirit on people's lives, and he wanted to have the same impact. You see, Simon liked to astonish people. He loved admirers and the reputation he earned.

All the people, from small to great, were paying attention to him, saying, "This man is the Power of God that is called Great." (Acts 8:10)

However, verse thirteen indicates that the miracles of God had turned the tables on Simon; the astonisher had been outdone and was himself amazed.¹ Time for a power upgrade! Simon concluded, “Never mind receiving the Spirit myself. I’ll just buy a franchise and add Holy Spirit impartation to my repertoire of magic tricks.” We never hear the end of Simon’s story beyond Peter’s stern rebuke (Acts 8:14–24). However, there’s a lesson for everyone about ministering in the power of God.

Part of the preparation for serving God is to meet the magician inside each of us. We all enjoy the admiration that sometimes comes with ministry positions. No one will last long in a role if they do not bear good fruit. But our detour begins either when we conclude that the success or security of our position is proportionate to what we can do, or when we start to revel in our reputation. Then we might start offering our prayer, worship, and Bible study times to the Lord with the secret intent of acquiring the power of God for our own glory. Nothing is a secret from God; He sees our hearts, and He doesn’t trade power or glory.

Once we have met the magician, though, we can deal with him or her and write a better ending to our own story. The power of God is given to bring glory to Him and to set captives free. The step Simon seems to have missed—baptism with the Holy Spirit—involves surrendering ourselves to Him. The best guard against the magician mentality is to focus our lives on glorifying God, and to minister out of compassion for those who need His touch.

1. The same Greek word is used for “astonishing” and “amazed” in Acts 8:9 and 13.