**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ACTS-030. SIMON THE SOURCERER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God."*

*Acts 8:21*

The era of the birth of Christianity was one of fermenting opinion and decaying faith. Then, as now, men's minds were seething and unsettled, and that unrest which is the precursor of great changes in intellectual and spiritual habitudes affected the civilised world. Such a period is ever one of predisposition to superstition. The one true bond which unites God and man being obscured, and to the consciousness of many snapped, men's minds become the prey of visionary terrors. Demand creates supply, and the magician and miracle-worker, the possessor of mysterious ways into the Unknown, is never far off at such a time. Partly deceived and partly deceiving, he is as sure a sign of the lack of profound religious conviction and of the presence of unsatisfied religious aspirations in men's souls, as the stormy petrel or the floating seaweed is of a tempest on the seas.

So we find the early preachers of Christianity coming into frequent contact with pretenders to magical powers. Sadly enough, they were mostly Jews, who prostituted their clearer knowledge to personal ends, and having tacked on to it some theosophic rubbish which they had learned from Alexandria, or mysticism which had filtered to them from the East, or magic arts from Phrygia, went forth, the only missionaries that Judaism sent out, to bewilder and torture men's minds. What a fall from Israel's destination, and what a lesson for the stewards of the oracles of God!

Of such a sort were Elymas, the sorcerer whom Paul found squatting at the ear of the Roman Governor of Cyprus; the magicians at Ephesus; the vagabond Jews exorcists, who with profitable eclecticism, as they thought, tried to add the name of Jesus as one more spell to their conjurations; and, finally, this Simon the sorcerer. Established in Samaria, he had been juggling and conjuring and seeing visions, and professing to be a great mysterious personality, and had more than permitted the half-heathen Samaritans, who seem to have had more religious susceptibility and less religious knowledge than the Jews, and so were a prepared field for all such pretenders, to think of him as in some sense an incarnation of God, and perhaps to set him up as a rival or caricature of Him who in the neighbouring Judaea was being spoken of as the power of God, God manifest in the flesh.

To the city thus moved comes no Apostle, but a Christian man who begins to preach, and by miracles and teaching draws many souls to Christ.

The story of Simon Magus in his attitude to the Gospel is a very striking and instructive one. It presents for our purpose now mainly three points to which I proceed to refer.

**I. An instance of a wholly unreal, because inoperative, faith.**

He believed, says the narrative, and believing was baptized. It is worth noting, in passing, how the profession of faith without anything more was considered by the Early Church sufficient. But obviously his was no true faith. The event showed that it was not.

What was it which made his faith thus unreal?

It rested wholly on the miracles and signs; he wondered when he saw them. Of course, miracles were meant to lead to faith; but if they did not lead on to a deeper sense of one's own evil and need, and so to a spiritual apprehension, then they were of no use.

The very beginning of the story points to the one bond that unites to God, as being the sense of need and the acceptance with heart and will of the testimony of Jesus Christ. Such a disposition is shown in the Samaritans, who make a contrast with Simon in that they believed Philip preaching, while Simon believed him working miracles. The true place of miracles is to attract attention, to prepare to listen to the word. They are only introductory. A faith may be founded on them, but, on the other hand, the impressions which they produce may be evanescent. How subordinate then, their place at the most! And the one thing which avails is a living contact of heart and soul with Jesus Christ.

Again, Simon's belief was purely an affair of the understanding. We are not to suppose, I think, that he merely believed in Philip as a miracle-worker; he must have had some notion about Philip's Master, and we know that it was belief in Jesus as the Christ that qualified in the Apostolic age for baptism. So it is reasonable to suppose that he had so much of head knowledge. But it was only head knowledge. There was in it no penitence, no self-abandonment, no fruit in holy desires; or in other words, there was no heart. It was credence, but not trust.

Now it does not matter how much or how little you know about Jesus Christ. It does not matter how you have come to that knowledge. It does not matter though you have received Christian ordinances as Simon had. If your faith is not a living power, leading to love and self-surrender, it is really nought. And here, on its earliest conflict with heathen magic, the gospel proclaims by the mouth of the Apostle what is true as to all formalists and nominal Christians: Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter, for thy heart is not right. One thing only unites to God--a faith which cleanses the heart, a faith which lays hold on Christ with will and conscience, a faith which, resting on penitent acknowledgment of sin, trusts wholly to His great mercy.

**II. An instance of the constant tendency to corrupt Christianity with heathen superstition.**

The Apostles' bestowal of the Holy Ghost, which was evidently accompanied by visible signs, had excited Simon's desire for so useful an aid to his conjuring, and he offers to buy the power, judging of them by himself, and betraying that what he was ready to buy he was also intending to sell.

The offer to buy has been taken as his great sin. Surely it was but the outcome of a greater. It was not only what he offered, but what he desired, that was wrong. He wanted that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost. That preposterous wish was quite as bad as, and was the root of, his absurd offer to bribe Peter. Bribe Peter, indeed! Some of Peter's successors would have been amenable to such considerations, but not the horny-handed fisherman who had once said, Silver and gold have I none.

Peter's answer, especially the words of my text, puts the Christian principle in sharp antagonism to the heathen one.

Simon regards what is sacred and spiritual purely as part of his stock-in-trade, contributing to his prestige. He offers to buy it. And the foundation of all his errors is that he regards spiritual gifts as capable of being received and exercised apart altogether from moral qualifications. He does not think at all of what is involved in the very name, the Holy Ghost.

Now, on the other hand, Peter's answer lays down broadly and sharply the opposite truth, the Christian principle that a heart right in the sight of God is the indispensable qualification for all possession of spiritual power, or of any of the blessings which Jesus gives.

How the heart is made right, and what constitutes righteousness is another matter. That leads to the doctrine of repentance and faith.

The one thing that makes such participation impossible is being and continuing in the gall of bitterness, and the bond of iniquity. Or, to put it into more modern words, all the blessings of the Gospel are a gift of God, and are bestowed only on moral conditions. Faith which leads to love and personal submission to the will of God makes a man a Christian. Therefore, outward ordinances are only of use as they help a man to that personal act.

Therefore, no other man or body of men can do it for us, or come between us and God.

And in confirmation, notice how Peter here speaks of forgiveness. His words do not sound as if he thought that he held the power of absolution, but he tells Simon to go to God who alone can forgive, and refers Simon's fate to God's mercy.

These tendencies, which Simon expresses so baldly, are in us all, and are continually reappearing. How far much of what calls itself Christianity has drifted from Peter's principle laid down here, that moral and spiritual qualifications are the only ones which avail for securing part or lot in the matter of Christ's gifts received for, and bestowed on, men! How much which really rests on the opposite principle, that these gifts can be imparted by men who are supposed to possess them, apart altogether from the state of heart of the would-be recipient, we see around us to-day! Simony is said to be the securing ecclesiastical promotion by purchase. But it is much rather the belief that the gift of God can be purchased with anything but personal faith in Jesus, the Giver and the Gift. The effects of it are patent among us. Ceremonies usurp the place of faith. A priesthood is exalted. The universal Christian prerogative of individual access to God is obscured. Christianity is turned into a kind of magic.

**III. An instance of the worthlessness of partial convictions.**

Simon was but slightly moved by Peter's stern rebuke. He paid no heed to the exhortation to pray for forgiveness and to repent of his wickedness, but still remained in substantially his old error, in that he accredited Peter with power, and asked him to pray for him, as if the Apostle's prayer would have some special access to God which his, though he were penitent, could not have. Further, he showed no sense of sin. All that he wished was that none of the things which ye have spoken come upon me.

How useless are convictions which go no deeper down than Simon's did!

What became of him we do not know. But there are old ecclesiastical traditions about him which represent him as a bitter enemy in future of the Apostle. And Josephus has a story of a Simon who played a degrading part between Felix and Drusilla, and who is thought by some to have been he. But in any case, we have no reason to believe that he ever followed Peter's counsel or prayed to God for forgiveness. So he stands for us as one more tragic example of a man, once not far from the kingdom of God' and drifting ever further away from it, because, at the fateful moment, he would not enter in. It is hard to bring such a man as near again as he once was. Let us learn that the one key which opens the treasury of God's blessings, stored for us all in Jesus, is our own personal faith, and let us beware of shutting our ears and our hearts against the merciful rebukes that convict us of this our wickedness, and point us to the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world, and therefore our sin.