

# Acts

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)*

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)*

## **The Baptism Of John**

**January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2024**

**Acts 18:24 – 19:7**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning, Redeemer! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 18.

Our text for this morning marks the beginning of what is often referred to as Paul's third missionary journey. After briefly revisiting the churches in Galatia, Paul eventually comes to Ephesus where he will spend three years equipping the local church. In our passage this morning, we are going to read about two different episodes in the early days at Ephesus. In both episodes, Paul and his team encounter people in Ephesus who are well-intentioned but ill-informed. In particular, it appears that there was confusion surrounding the issue of baptism.

We're going to spend the bulk of our time this morning unpacking this misunderstanding, but before we jump in, there is a general lesson in these stories that I want you to see. This passage reminds us that when we seek to minister to people we always need to begin *where they are*. As Priscilla and Aquilla and Paul began their work in Ephesus, they very quickly discovered that the people they were ministering to had been shaped by the ministry of John the Baptist. That starting place had some advantages and some disadvantages as we will see in a moment, but let's remember this morning that *everyone starts somewhere*.

Find the common ground. Identify the misunderstandings. And then, open God's word and point them to the truth. That's what we see in our text today. Look with me now to Acts 18. We're going to be reading from verse 24 to verse 7 of chapter 19. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. <sup>25</sup> He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. <sup>26</sup> He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. <sup>27</sup> And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, <sup>28</sup> for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

**19** And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. <sup>2</sup> And he said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” <sup>3</sup> And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They said, “Into John's baptism.” <sup>4</sup> And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.” <sup>5</sup> On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup> And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. <sup>7</sup> There were about twelve men in all. (Acts 18:24-19:7 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In these two separate episodes, we see one common misunderstanding. In the first episode, we meet Apollos. By all accounts Apollos was saved, and his teaching about Jesus was accurate in many respects. But in the area of baptism, it appears that he was fuzzy. Look again at verse 25:

And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, **though he knew only the baptism of John.** (Acts 18:25b ESV)

In the second episode, we meet twelve men who are suffering from the same misunderstanding, only they appear to be even more confused than Apollos. Paul asked them:

“Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” <sup>3</sup> And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They said, “**Into John's baptism.**” (Acts 19:2b-3 ESV)

If we are going to understand what is happening in this story then we need to try to understand what this understanding was all about. To that end, we need to ask the question:

## What Was The Baptism Of John?

The “John” that is being referred to in these verses is John the Baptist. He was the last Old Covenant prophet – the last voice that would cry out and pave the way for the Messiah before Jesus finally arrived on the scene. As John ministered in the wilderness, large crowds went out to listen to him preach day after day and many were baptized by him. It appears that Apollos and these 12 men were all impacted by John’s ministry, and they all received his baptism.

But what does that mean? What was the baptism of John? First, we need to understand that:

### 1. It was a symbol of repentance

Paul says just that in verse 4:

And Paul said, “John baptized with **the baptism of repentance** (Acts 19:4a ESV)

John essentially preached a powerful two-point sermon in his ministry, and it began with a powerful and urgent announcement: We are all sinners, and we need to repent. We need to acknowledge that we have done wrong before God. We need to confess our sin. And then we need to turn from it. In Luke’s gospel, we catch a glimpse into John’s preaching. In Luke 3, John pleads:

**Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.** And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. <sup>9</sup>The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

<sup>10</sup> “What should we do then?” the crowd asked.

<sup>11</sup> John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.”

<sup>12</sup> Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”

<sup>13</sup> “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.

<sup>14</sup> Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”

He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.” (Luke 3:8-14 ESV)

In John's preaching, we learn a great deal about true repentance. Repentance is more than simply saying sorry. Repentance begins with "sorry" but TRUE repentance then proceeds to a change in behaviour. Repentance means turning away from sin. Repentance means making restitution to those you have wronged as best as you are able.

Those who received John's baptism were declaring that they knew that they had sinned. As they went into the water, it was a visible symbol of their repentance.

But there was a second aspect of John's teaching and also a second aspect of the baptism. It was a symbol of *repentance*, and it was also a sign of *anticipation*.

## 2. It was a sign of anticipation

Look again at verse 4 of our passage this morning. Paul explains:

"John baptized with the baptism of repentance, **telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him**, that is, Jesus." (Acts 19:4 ESV)

John's baptism was never meant to be seen as an *end*. No, John's baptism was all about *anticipating* the one who was to come! It was about *preparing* for the arrival of the promised Messiah! If we look back at Luke's gospel, we can see that very clearly in John's ministry. We read:

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. <sup>16</sup> John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. **But one who is more powerful than I will come**, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. **He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.** (Luke 3:15-16 ESV)

So, John's baptism was a way for the people of God to prepare themselves for the arrival of the Messiah King! The One who was to come would pour out the Holy Spirit on his people! He would purify them as with *fire*!

John's ministry was to *prepare* people for the arrival of that day. John's baptism was about *anticipation*.

But we see here in Ephesus that not everyone who listened to John fully understood the sign. Apollos was close. He was fuzzy in areas, but somewhere along the way Apollos clearly came to recognize Jesus as the promised Messiah. We read in verse 25:

He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, **he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus**, though he knew only the baptism of John. (Acts 18:25 ESV)

He was fuzzy, but he was saved. He simply needed some clarity – presumably around Christian baptism. We read in verse 26:

He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, **they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.** (Acts 19:26 ESV)

Priscilla and Aquila – a wife and husband team – respectfully pulled Apollos aside to help identify and clarify some of the missing pieces in his understanding. As an aside, this brief verse is a great example of how we can sharpen one another without tearing down or embarrassing each other.

So, Apollos – in spite of his “fuzziness” – simply needed a little correction. The twelve men that Paul spoke to on the other hand needed more than a little correction. These men were outright lost! John preached that the Messiah was going to come and baptize the people with the Holy Spirit, but when Paul asked these men if they had received the Spirit, they replied:

“No, **we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.**” (Acts 19:2b ESV)

Talk about missing the point! Here, we are reminded that there are people in this world who are *so close* to the truth, but who still do not have saving faith. These were *religious* men. They were *repentant* men! They had come under conviction through John’s teaching and had turned from their sin and received his baptism. By all accounts, the world would have called them *good* men.

But they were still lost.

They had not believed in Jesus Christ. They had not been baptized in his name. They hadn’t even *heard* of the Holy Spirit!

I have never met disciples of John the Baptist, but I have met many people like this. They are religious people. Nice people. Obedient and diligent people. They see the church as a helpful social club and the Bible as a helpful moral book, but they have never placed their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour and therefore have never received the powerful Spirit of God in their lives. They live *so close to the truth!* But they are lost.

That's who these men were. But everything changed in verse 5. Look there with me again:

**On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.** <sup>6</sup> And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. (Acts 19:5-6 ESV)

Here, I need to say a quick word about verse 6. This is the verse that grabs our attention, isn't it? Sometimes in Acts, people get saved, and baptized, and nothing particularly noteworthy happens. The Ethiopian eunuch didn't have this experience. The Philippian jailer didn't have this experience. Yet, there are instances in the book of Acts where conversion is accompanied by miraculous gift of tongues and prophecy. Why is that?

There are various explanations to this phenomenon, but the explanation that makes the most sense to me is that God sent these signs at *particular times* to give His CLEAR VALIDATION of a surprising development. These explosions of prophecy and tongues draw our attention back to the day of Pentecost – and I believe that's the point! As the gospel broke new, unexpected ground – like when the Samaritans first accepted Christ, or when the Gentiles first accepted Christ – God recreated the Pentecost experience in order to display His clear endorsement of what was happening. In these signs, it's as if God is declaring: “This is REAL! They are IN! They have received the Spirit JUST LIKE YOU DID!” Commentator I. Howard Marshall explains:

It is clear from the other stories of conversion in Acts that such manifestations took place spasmodically and were not the general rule (8:17 note; 8:39; 13:52; 16:34); in the present case some unusual gift was perhaps needed to convince this group of ‘semi-Christians’ that they were now fully members of Christ's church.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 326.

John had taught that one was coming who was going to baptize with the Spirit and with fire! When these men received baptism in Jesus' name, God sent the Spirit and the fire in an unmistakable way! They needed to see that. They needed to receive that.

Does this mean that we should expect tongues and prophecy every time a person comes to Christ? No, I don't think that's the lesson here. G. Campbell Morgan is wise when he cautions:

We cannot base a doctrine of the Spirit's methods upon any one story... The important matter is that we have the Spirit, without Whose presence and illumination we cannot preach this Christ, or teach Him.<sup>2</sup>

Amen. I don't believe that this story was recorded so that we would speculate and debate about spiritual gifts. It seems to me that Luke wrote this story in such a way so as to draw our attention to the contrast between John's baptism and what we now know as Christian baptism. To that end, I want to conclude this morning by asking the question:

## What Is Christian Baptism?

Even though the baptism in verse five only takes up one sentence of this passage, it is nevertheless the centre of this story! Their misunderstanding about John *led up* to this moment. The powerful outpouring of the Spirit *flows out* of this moment. But at the center of the story is a group of men placing their trust in Jesus and being baptized in his name. So, what is Christian baptism? First, and most foundationally, we need to see that:

### 1. It is a symbol of our union with Jesus

Paul uses this language in his letter to the Romans. He explains:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup>We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

<sup>5</sup>For if we have been **united with him in a death like his**, we shall certainly be **united with him in a resurrection like his**. (Romans 6:3-5 ESV)

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<sup>2</sup> G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 445.

Baptism is one of the Christian sacraments. The word “sacrament” comes from the Latin word “sacramentum”, and it means to *pledge allegiance*. Think about that: When you go through the waters of baptism you are physically and demonstrably declaring your allegiance to Jesus Christ. You are declaring to the world, “I am united with him!”

The other Christian sacrament, communion, is a *restatement* of that first pledge.

You need to be clear on this. When you go under the water, you are saying that his death was your death. The old you – the sinful you – the you that was born into the family of Adam under the curse of sin – DIED on that cross! You were buried with Jesus! And when you come out of that water, you are declaring that his life is your life! You are a new creation! You used to be in ADAM, but now you are in CHRIST! You are no longer under the tyranny of sin! Death will not ultimately hold you. Sin will no longer define you. You are now united with Christ.

That’s the symbol – and it is where the Christian life begins. Baptism is often referred to as the initiatory rite in the Christian faith. It is the birthday party! It is where faith begins! We have seen this time and time again in the book of Acts. Think, for example of the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in chapter 8. He heard the gospel, responded in faith, and then asked:

“See, here is water! **What prevents me from being baptized?**” (Acts 8:36b ESV)

And he WAS baptized! Then and there. We see the same pattern in chapter 16 with the Philippian jailer. He heard the gospel, surrendered his life to Christ and we read:

**and he was baptized at once**, he and all his family. (Acts 16:33b ESV)

And, once again, we see it here:

On hearing this, **they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus**. (Acts 19:5 ESV)

I want to challenge you to think about this. If you are here today and you have placed your trust in Jesus as your Lord, but you have *not yet been baptized*, then you need to do something about that!



Baptism is the pledge! Baptism is where the life of faith begins! Because Christian baptism is a symbol of our union with Jesus.

Flowing out of that, we can say more specifically that Christian baptism is:

## 2. It is a symbol of forgiveness received

If you simply flip ahead a page or two in your Bible, you will see this in Acts 22. Reflecting back on his own baptism, Paul recounts how a man named Ananias explained the gospel to him.

Ananias then asked Paul:

And now why do you wait? Rise and **be baptized and wash away your sins**, calling on his name.’ (Acts 22:16 ESV)

When you are baptized in the name of Jesus, you are declaring in faith that Jesus’ died on the cross for your sin. As you come up out of that water, it is a tangible, physical display that your sin is now *washed away*! If we think back to what we just saw in Romans 6, through baptism, we are declaring that Jesus’ death was *our death*. The curse that he bore on the cross was *our curse*! And when he declared “It is finished!” our sin was once and for all removed from us as far as the east is from the west!

John’s baptism was preparatory in that it reminded us of our *need* for a substitute. John’s baptism declared: “I am a sinner!” But Christian baptism goes a step further. It declares: “I am a sinner, but Jesus is my Saviour and I have been FORGIVEN because HE DIED FOR ME!” Isn’t that amazing!?

Can you imagine what it must have been like for these men knowing the first half of that statement but not knowing the second? What a misery it is to see your sin but to have no sight of your saviour! How hopeless it must be to see so clearly that something is wrong, but to have no solution in sight.

In Christian baptism, we declare that there *is* a solution to all that is wrong with this world and his name is Jesus! Baptism is a symbol of forgiveness received.

Finally, Christian baptism is a symbol of new life received.

### 3. It is a symbol of new life received

As we look back at that passage from Romans 6 which I read a few moments ago, Paul explains:

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, **in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.** (Romans 6:4 ESV)

Now, we understand this symbol of new life in two ways. First, baptism is a symbol of our *final resurrection*. In our baptism, we are declaring that the grave will not hold us down!

Death was never part of the plan for God's creation. Did you know that? There was no death in the Garden of Eden. Death is our enemy, and it is an intruder in this world. Death exists because sin exists. Paul explains in Romans 6:

For the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23a ESV)

But since Jesus bore our sin on the cross – since he paid the death that was owed and removed our sin from us – a way has now been made for us to be *set free from death itself!* Jesus PROVED that when he walked out of the tomb and Jesus PROMISES that to everyone who turns from their sin and places their trust in him. If we look back at the verse we just read, Paul goes on to explain:

For the wages of sin is death, **but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.** (Romans 6:23 ESV)

Through Jesus, we have received the gift of *eternal life!* Because of our union with him, the grave will not ultimately hold us. Paul explains:

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, **we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.** (Romans 6:5 ESV)

If you are a Christian then you possess resurrection hope! Amen? Amen.

But there is a second element to this newness of life. In Christian baptism, we are also declaring that we have received a new life *now*. It's really important that you see that.

Through Christ, we have become a new creation. We used to be slaves to sin. We used to be dead in our trespasses. But now, we can finally live the life that God intended for us to live, because now we have been filled with the Holy Spirit! God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel and told us that this day would come. He declared:

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> **And I will put my Spirit within you**, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezekiel 36:26-27 ESV)

John the Baptist recognized that this day was right around the corner and so he declared:

I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. **He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.** (Luke 3:16 ESV)

The twelve men in Ephesus didn't understand this piece yet, and Paul wasted no time in explaining it. The new life that Ezekiel and John were pointing forward to has arrived! EVERYONE who believes in Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit! EVERYONE! Which is why, when Paul met these men and when he wanted to discern the validity of their faith, he asked:

“Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” (Acts 19:2a ESV)

When Paul learned that they had not received the Spirit – that they did not even *know* about the Spirit – he knew that these men had not yet believed.

These men who were lost in powerless, dead religion – these men who had been living *so close* to the truth – finally placed their trust in Jesus and pledged their allegiance to him in baptism. Immediately, everything changed! They were raised to newness of life – with resurrection hope for the future and Holy Spirit power for the present.

So, let me ask you: Have you received the Spirit? Or are you like these twelve men in Ephesus? Moral. Nice. But spiritually dead. Follow the example of these men. Turn away from dead religion. Repent of your sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ who lived the life you could not

live and who died in your place for your sin! Make the pledge. Declare your union with Christ. In him is forgiveness of sin and newness of life. Through him we receive the Spirit.

Let's pray together.