

Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and Power

Acts 19:1-20

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Let's go before the Lord, because we need him.

Father, we thank you for this song of worship. We need you to crack the skies, to show us the way by your light. We need to see you both in doubt as well as in truth. Father, we need your Spirit to guide us. We need your Spirit to teach us. We need you to open us up from the inside out, to make us a people who depend on you alone, that we might demonstrate and show you. Oh, how we need you. Come, Lord Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.

Acts chapter nineteen, verses one to twenty.

And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. 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." And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." 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." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. There were about twelve men in all.

And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them. Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims." Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled. Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God.

Wow. What a story. And none too lacking in controversy. For in this passage has been found all kinds of practices, practices which continue today, expectations which continue today of the work of the Holy Spirit. And so, being as original as I can be, I saw that there was two characters in this

story, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. So they're in two parts of my title. But really what is at issue here is power. Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and power. What are we to do with this story? How are we to apply it? I hope, by God's spirit alone, that we can apply this in a way that would help all of us to see Jesus and to depend upon him alone. So let's look together then -- Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and power.

First, Jesus. We see this in verses one through four, where it says this -- he's traveling to Ephesus. Ephesus was a well-known place, an important city, trade -- but there was also a great deal of the occult and of worship. Huge temple to Artemus situated right next to Ephesus. In fact, the temple to Artemus was considered to be one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was four times the size of the Parthenon. So worship and magical powers were greatly respected in Ephesus.

So Paul comes, as was his practice going into a city -- he would try to associate with it himself and try to find any disciples who were there in a given city. And so he asks them a very normal question. And the interesting thing for us is that he is presuming belief, and he simply says, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And their answer is, "No. We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." He asks the right question. They are at least in some way proclaiming belief, because he at least seeks them out and presumes that they are disciples.

And the very clear question for us as we come to this passage -- in fact, how we answer this following question, the whole passage turns. Are these people to whom Paul is speaking -- are they Christians? If they are, the passage should be applied in such a way that there is a second work of the Holy Spirit. However, if they are not Christians, that means they have not received the Holy Spirit. Therefore, what they receive should be in consort with what is the normal practice of the Book of Acts, that when one professes belief through repentance, when one confesses faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, you are then baptized with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, as Jesus instructed them to do -- Matthew chapter twenty-eight. And that when this happens, that that faith is recognized and brought about by the Spirit of the Living God and they receive the Spirit.

Now, what is interesting as we've gone through the Book of Acts, some demonstrate the gift of the Holy Spirit that is the speaking in tongues and of prophesy. But not everyone's who's converted in the Book of Acts demonstrates these things. So the question before us, first and foremost, as we consider Jesus Christ and his operation in this passage and the centrality of the name of Christ -- because it's mentioned a number of times, the name of the Lord Jesus -- we have to ask: are they Christians? It seems to me that any regular reading of this chapter, allowing the Scripture to speak for itself and not read anything into it, is to see the following things take place: Paul says to a group of people who seem to be professing faith, "Have you received the Holy Spirit?" And when they say, "We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit," that question which receives that answer leads to no other conclusion than to say, then by what name were you baptized? If Jesus said you were to go making disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, we have the Trinitarian form of baptism in the triune name of God, the Godhead with three persons. So when they say, "We haven't even heard," it is a correct conclusion to make that these people are not Christians.

So Paul leads them through what then needs to happen. He says, verse three, "In what name were you baptized?" They said, "Well, we were baptized into John's baptism." And then Paul says, "Well, okay. That makes sense, but you weren't baptized by John the Baptist through a baptism of repentance. To repent of sin and to then be ready to believe and trust in faith in the one who would come after him" -- as John made very clear in his ministry. But clearly, not all of John the Baptist's disciples continued to spread that reality, because they were not prepared to answer or to even understand that after repentance comes faith and baptism in the triune name of God, of the Godhead.

And so he leads them through what it then means to know the Lord Jesus Christ. The parts are all here: repentance, the confession of sin where that sin is a picture of rebelling against the authority of God as our Heavenly Father. That rebellion looks like deliberate disobedience and a refusal to follow his

statutes and his ways. A refusal to acknowledge that he is not just Savior, but he is Lord of my soul, he's more interested than just in forgiveness -- he wants to make me like himself. So I repent of my sinful rebellion, but there is also another kind of repentance, not just of sin where I have not done what I ought to have done, but also sin where I didn't do what I ought to have done. Meaning, I have begun to trust in something other than Jesus as my functional savior. Trusting in something else that will bring me salvation, as it were, lowercase S. Sins of success or joy or satisfaction or pride -- if it's something outside of the Lord, no matter what it is, no matter how good it may be, it's serving as a false savior, an idol. So the repentance which is spoken of here is the repentance of sinful rebellion, but also putting anything else up in Jesus' place.

But he also says that it is to have faith, to profess faith. He says, "On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus." The whole idea of being a disciple, which is what Jesus taught Paul and others to go and make, is -- the implication involved there is -- do you place your trust in the authority of another? Namely, the one who is your Creator, who is also come as your Savior? The Name. The Name of Jesus. And there is no other name, the Scriptures tell us, in heaven or on earth, by which men can be saved. The whole idea -- Jesus, he shall save his people from their sins. The trust in Jesus is to say, "I am in need of forgiveness." And the only way that happens after I've repented is to trust in the only one who can cleanse me from my sin.

Repentance, faith, and then baptism. He baptizes them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Why? Not because there was anything in the water. It was because, for Paul -- notice, repentance, faith, baptism, and the reception of the Holy Spirit all come together. That what baptism does -- it is a picture of a cleaning away of sin with water, that is a picture of the blood of Christ. It is a sign. But when that sign is given, it is a picture of what God is doing internally, that he can only do not with water, but the thing it signifies -- the application of the blood of Christ through the powerful yet mysterious work of the Holy Spirit. How that happens, I can't explain to you fully. It is the mystery of God. But it is something that water cannot do. But to be baptized into the Name means that I can only be washed clean through the name of Jesus. And the Spirit, as John would teach, will come up through the testimony of Jesus like a spring of living water welling up within us. That is what the Spirit does, and the baptism of water signifies.

So for Paul, it isn't repentance, faith, baptism with water, then another step of receiving a baptism of the Holy Spirit. Notice, for Paul, the reception of the Holy Spirit and being baptized into the triune name of God come together. The sign and the thing signified. So notice, he doesn't say, "Were you baptized into the Spirit?" He doesn't say that. He says, "What name were you baptized in?" Meaning, this baptism, this kind of thing. Not a Spirit baptism. So for Paul, to be in relationship with the Lord Jesus is to repent, to profess faith and trust, and to receive the sign of the thing signified, the washing away of sin through the blood of the sacrificial lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross for us.

But then something interesting happens. The only place in the entire New Testament, Paul lays on hands and they receive the Holy Spirit. There is no other instance of this in the entire New Testament. It wasn't required at Pentecost. It wasn't required at the Samaritan's conversion. It wasn't required at the Philippian jailor and his family being converted. This is the only place. That should teach us as readers of the Bible that there is something unique going on here. So the question before us is, is the reception of the Holy Spirit here -- is this normal? And then, secondarily, what is to be expected?

Is this normal? Let me suggest this -- and I would ask that you join with me as you study the Scriptures, if you are a believer and if you are not a believer, the Scriptures are here to at least look through. And I ask you to push back on me if you believe I am in error. But please, let's do so by demonstrating the truth from Scripture. I want to posit to you today that if this is the only instance of Paul laying on of hands where the reception of the Spirit happens at that moment and then the prophesying and the demonstration of the charismatic gifts -- if that is normal, then why doesn't it

happen in other places? And if it is normal, then we better call into question most of the planet that professes faith in Jesus Christ.

I would suggest for the sake of discussion that this is not normal. This is something unique. Because Paul demonstrates this power not in and of himself, but God is demonstrating this power as Paul goes into new frontiers of Jewish ministry or Gentile ministry, and the gospel is having great, impactful change. There we begin to see extraordinary things taking place, and I believe that's what's happening here. As he comes to them, he has a question. "Have you received the Holy Spirit?" They do not. Now, what needs to be demonstrated? What needs to be demonstrated is the Spirit's presence. So something is unique happening here, because the God of the Bible can choose to do as he likes, and in this case, he chooses -- at this frontier of new ministry for Paul -- to demonstrate the Spirit's presence through the charismatic gifts here. And I believe it would be in error for us to suggest or to expect that this ought to be normal.

But we need to look beyond the charismatic gifts. The word "charismatic" means literally, charismatic -- *charis mata*. The word *mata*, gifts. *Charis*, grace. Gifts of grace. It is a misnomer to simply suggest that the charismata -- the charismatic gifts -- are only prophesying, healing, and the speaking in tongues. All gifts, every gift that you have -- I don't care what it is -- if you are gifted with numbers, if you are gifted with food, if you are gifted with teaching, if you are gifted with hospitality -- they are all charismata, gifts of grace.

And let me suggest: what is most important here is not the demonstration of a particular subset of gifts, but the demonstration of the fruit of the Spirit in evidence in people who are professing faith. That is what is in order here, which leads me to this question, then: isn't it easy, if you're thinking -- now, here I want to specifically speak to my reformed in tradition and Presbyterian brothers and sisters in Christ. It's been very easy with -- not with you, but I'm saying within my tradition and with my training and other things, where I've seen a lot of criticism given towards our charismatic and Pentecostal brothers and sisters in Christ. I used to be quite critical of them, until I was humbled when I worshiped with them. And while I may disagree as to what is to be the expected norm of when the Holy Spirit comes and works in a person's life, what I greatly rejoice in and find great inspiration in is that, when they come to church, they expect for Jesus to show up.

And what I begin to see in my own life is that when I became convinced that the charismatic gifts have ceased, it lulled me into thinking -- and here I confess to you, even as a pastor -- I was confessing to the Lord that maybe, that when I think that you're done working in this way, that somehow, God, you're predictable, and you will only work in certain ways. And I became quite convicted in 2005 of just how much, even as a pastor, that I would show up on Sunday morning -- was I expecting Jesus and the Holy Spirit to show up? Was I praying for that? I began to look more deeply into what the Holy Spirit's work is, what should be expected.

And here I've written down, and I don't think I can say it any better, so I'm just going to read my very words that I wrote. What ought to be expected from the Holy Spirit is a demonstration that the reception of the Spirit is less about particular gifts and more about the fruit of Christ's character formed in those who believe. It is not to be expected that a certain subset of charismatic gifts ought to be on display, but love, hope, joy, gentleness, faith. We can have great gifts, but Paul says, if we have not love, we are a resounding gong. What is important to Paul? What is important to the Lord? That the character of Christ is demonstrated through the work of the Spirit in our character. And when he is at work in our character, his character is on display.

And let me invite you, brothers and sisters who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ -- I have become a Presby-costal. Because the Holy Spirit is real. He is not to be trifled with. He is powerful, and he plans to not bring attention to himself, but attention to Jesus. And when he does, we are not just forgiven. We are

made new. Every strand, every thought, every motive, every act, every word, is all free game for him, and he means to do that in us so that Christ might be demonstrated.

And I've become one who is now learning and praying to expect the Spirit to show up on Sunday morning. Are you? Do you? And I would just ask that you join with me, that when you walk into this room, if you're a Christian, please pray with me: I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit, because he will take from what belongs to the Father and to the Son, and he will give it. He who lacks wisdom, let him ask for it. He who lacks power, who lacks grace and mercy, let him come as a beggar, ready to be filled. Come thirsty and find drink. Come hungry and find food. Come, Holy Spirit. I believe.

But Jesus and the Holy Spirit -- there's something else going on here. It's power. What's interesting is that when they believed, they continued to worship the Lord. Paul goes on and he begins to continue to preach the gospel, to contend with those in the synagogue, which was his practice. They rejected him, as we saw last week. He shook of his clothes, in essence, and said, "This is on you. I'm moving on." And he did. But he continued to teach, the passage tells us, for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the Word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

And as God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, we hear of the handkerchiefs and aprons again -- the only place in Scripture. Is this a norm? It wasn't Paul going around with handkerchiefs and aprons. But clearly the Spirit of God was so uniquely powerful working through one of the disciples who was changed radically. God was doing a remarkable, special, particular thing in this moment, that people's lives were changed even because items of clothing had touched his skin. Not something, I believe, the Scriptures are telling us should be expected or replicated. Now, I say that to you and ask that you push against me. But let's do so by seeing what the Word of God says. Is this norm to be expected? I do not see that.

But having said that, there is power, very clear power, by work through the name of Jesus. Now here's what we see. First -- and I'll go through this quickly -- there is independent power and dependent power. Do you see the independent power? This group of sons of the high priest Sceva? Remember, this is a place of magical arts, even though they were of Jewish faith. They were clearly imbibing the culture of their day, involved in all kinds of occult worship and occult magical works. They were going around now in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ by the one that Paul preaches, and they were what? Asking and praying for people's evil spirits to come out.

Now, I want to demonstrate to you how that is completely independent power, though it looks like they're depending on the name of another. How do we know it's independent power? Because first, what is the source? Notice the pronouns. "I adjure you by the name." And then look at the response of the evil spirit. "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" Meaning, even the demons recognize -- even a man who is demon-possessed recognizes, you do not have any authority -- which is implicitly saying they thought they did. Their power was one in what they thought they had received, and the outcome was self-aggrandizement. They had hoped, clearly, by using these gifts and these magical arts, even though it was in the name -- clearly believing that it would help them in their success and achievement. That is the definition of independent power.

And it makes sense, does it not? It seems to be stable, because it gave them the illusion of control. I've got this formula that I can apply, and even the demons and spirits listen to me. So at first it seems like it's quite stable. But it's also gratifying, is it not, when you have this kind of independent power, this formula that you put into play. It's gratifying because it brings success. People respect you. They like you. They want you around. They ask for you. You don't ask for their email -- they ask for yours. So independent power can seem really good, except when it's not. Except when it comes back on you, and you get your rear end whooped, and you have to flee the house naked, and you have your independent authority handed back to you because it's crumbling through your fingers like sand. Because your independent power is only as solid as are your circumstances and others' willingness to hear you.

What's very clear is that their understanding of this power was completely egocentric. It was a replication of the creation-fall construct. Adam and Eve believed that if they had the power of God, they could be like God. Is that any different than what happens here? If they can have the formula to be like Paul, to do what Paul does, then I can have success. It didn't work that way, because even the demons said, "Who are you?"

But then, watch what happens, as it states -- after they flee the house, everybody hears about it. And they're like, whoa. The Holy Spirit and the name of Jesus is not to be trifled with. And watch what happens. Instead of independent power, what comes into play is dependent power. Watch. "Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all." It was extremely expensive. Why? Because they now realize their power is not in their belongings, their power is not in their gifts, their power is not in their formulas. Rather, their only power comes from something completely outside themselves, and it is in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. And it leads them not only to be willing to give up all that they have -- it also causes them to expose all that they are, and they confess their sins.

The only way that can happen is if one begins to move from independent power to dependent power, because you now realize you're not your own authority -- the Lord is. You're not your own righteousness -- Christ is. You're not your own means of success and achievement -- he has achieved everything that we need. And what happens is, unlike independent power, at first dependent power feels very destabilizing, because you're giving up to another. But it also, in the short run, it's very expensive. In the short run. Fifty thousand pieces of silver. This is a huge sum of money. But you know it's dependent power, because they recognize what they will receive is far greater than any short-term gain. That is what it looks like.

And so, therefore, when we begin to have dependent power -- not in ourselves, but in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit -- not just in salvation, but in all of life, I believe what is created is a far more solid foundation, where circumstances, personal abilities, and assets are not our foundation, because they're far too fickle. They're far too unsure. We have a firmer foundation. It's far more freeing to depend on the power of the Lord, because we're not trying to run and show and manipulate those around us, to perform that we've got it all together.

It's incredibly freeing, but it's also incredibly humanizing, because I learn that to be human is to depend on another. I learn that I was created to be in relationship with first my Heavenly Father. And we get to depend on another. And that's what it really means to be human. The one who created me, the one who is the Lord, the one who is the Savior, the one who has sent is Holy Spirit even when we did not deserve it -- He is the one who gives us love and mercy and grace. Then, in that we get to depend on. And when we do, we finally learn what it means to be human, because the more we depend on all that he is, our lives reflect his glory. And that was the purpose for Adam and Eve. It was the purpose of Israel. It was the purpose of the church. It is the purpose for anyone who calls on the Name, to love the Lord your God and to reflect his love to others. This is what dependent power looks like. This is what it means to be human, in relationship with a loving Savior who gives his Spirit to make us his people. May the Lord do this in us. May he make us a people more dependent on him and not on ourselves. And when we come into conversation, into worship, into work -- whatever we put our hands to -- may we be able to say, come, Holy Spirit. Oh, I need you. Let's pray.

Come, Holy Spirit. Oh, how we need you to direct us to our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, that we might reflect his glory. It is in his matchless name we pray. Amen.