

Words and Deeds: The Spirit's Next Arrival
By Jason Huff
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Isaiah 11:1-5; Mark 1:4-11; Acts 19:1-10

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 19:1-10. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. "While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?" "John's baptism," they replied. Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all. Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord."

I have a recurring dream that happens enough that I know it means something. Maybe you've had something like it. You're back in school, maybe high school, maybe college, and you know you've got an important class to get to, a test to take, something like that. And you can't find where your classroom is. You have no idea where to go. And when you start to think about it, you have no idea what the test is about. Even if you got there, you'd be clueless as to what you're supposed to do. I hate that dream with a passion because it's nerve-wracking and frustrating at the same time. There's nothing you can do to fix the situation.

I've read a little bit about this sort of dream, and it turns out, nobody knows exactly what it means or why we have it. Psychologists have suggested that it's current stress played out in our dreams to try and make sense of it. People who are conscientious in school tend to stay conscientious, and when we worry that we'll forget that detail on that report we're doing or that we won't finish the sermon or project on time, that we're missing something really important, it comes out dreaming about the one place we all were super stressed about. It's also funny because it's a relatively new dream in the history of the world. People who didn't go to the modern idea of school with its expectations and exams didn't have this dream.

I believe this dream comes from wanting to make sure we haven't forgotten anything or missed something. And for those of us who are spiritually minded, this can be huge. Did we miss something? As Christians, we believe that Jesus has paid the penalty for our sin. We do not owe anything; we are not charged with the guilt our sins deserve. And yet we still feel like there's something more we must do. Many religions around the world teach that you have to do certain things to win God's favor, like give money to the poor or pray a certain way several times a day. But there's always that lingering question...have I done enough? I am so thankful to God that our salvation is based on the finished work of Jesus and not on our own accomplishments. As believers, we know the only thing that matters is our faith in Christ, not passing a final exam.

But that brings us back to our passage and the real concern: what are these disciples missing and why? Why is the Holy Spirit so important, and why didn't these folks that Paul ran into have the Spirit? Is it possible we've missed something incredibly important too? We're going to unpack this Scripture a bit and see that we have nothing to fear when we put our whole faith and trust in Jesus and count on Him to do as He said in sending us the Spirit.

So to remind us where we were last week, Paul finished his second missionary journey, heading back home to Antioch after a stop in Jerusalem. He then started his third missionary journey, heading into new territory. He's now back in Ephesus, where he had stopped briefly to preach before heading home and where Apollos, Priscilla, and Aquila had been doing ministry before Apollos had moved on to Corinth.

Paul comes across some people that Luke describes as "disciples." This word in Greek means someone who follows a person or way of life and submits themselves to the teachings or discipline of that particular teacher. The question is, who do they follow? As we found out last week, the message about Jesus was becoming widespread, but not everyone knew everything they needed to know. At the beginning of his ministry, Apollos taught about Jesus but didn't know about the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

From how Paul describes them, these twelve were almost certainly disciples of John the Baptist – they might not have met him personally, but they had heard the message John was preaching that the Messiah was coming soon and they needed to be baptized as part of turning from sin, of repenting of what they'd done. John the Baptist actually became quite famous, and there are secular and Jewish sources from the day that mention him.

It's almost certain that these men were still waiting for the Messiah. They knew He was coming, but they didn't know He'd already arrived – that's why Paul says, "John told the people to believe in the one who was coming after him – that is, Jesus." These folks were still waiting. Did they follow God? Absolutely. They were eager to be holy, they were waiting for the Messiah.

Paul knew they weren't fully-formed Christians yet, though, because of one thing missing: the Holy Spirit. That's the first thing he asks about: "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they are like, "We hadn't even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." Now if they were followers of John the Baptist, they were almost certainly Jews, and they knew of the Spirit of God from the Old Testament. But what they didn't know is that the Holy Spirit was personal and meant for them and given by Jesus to His people.

At this point, we might ask, "Why does this matter so much? Does the Holy Spirit really make such a difference?" And the only reason that we ask that question is because we have such a weak understanding of who the Holy Spirit is and why He is so important in our lives. We have talked about the Holy Spirit during the book of Acts, but each time we learn more and I feel like I should emphasize Him more. You may hear me repeat myself a little, but we often talk so little about the Holy Spirit that it might take us a few times hearing about Him to really get it.

On the night Jesus was betrayed into the hands of His enemies by Judas, He promised the disciples in the upper room that when He left them, He would send them the Holy Spirit to be their guide and counselor who would remind them of everything He taught them. It would be through the Holy Spirit that they would do greater wonders than Jesus even did. And Jesus said the promises He made that night were for those long off – for all those who would follow in His disciples’ footsteps. That’s us. So when He promised His closest friends the Holy Spirit that night, He also promised that He would send the Holy Spirit to us.

Here is why the Holy Spirit is so important: ***He marks the believer as belonging specifically to Jesus.*** Believers in the Old Testament, boy, I wouldn’t have wanted to be them. They tried to follow God’s law, they wanted to be righteous, but in general, the Holy Spirit was not given to them. We read about the prophets being given the word to speak by the Holy Spirit, or David or one of the judges being filled with the Spirit. Yet this was extremely rare.

The Spirit would come and go as the Father directed. When David wrote Psalm 51 as he mourned over his sin with Bathsheba, he cried out, “Do not take your Holy Spirit from me.” The only place that God’s Spirit was promised to dwell was in the Temple. God had drawn near to the Israelites, but in a formal way; they could only come near through the shedding of blood, and no one but the high priest could ever enter into the Most Holy Place where the Spirit would be with them, and then only once a year. God was close, yet removed; because of their sins, the sins of Israel, the Jewish people could not be as close to God as God desired them to be.

When Jesus comes, everything changes. Through His death and resurrection, we are reconciled to God. Our sins are permanently covered by God’s grace in Jesus’ sacrifice on our behalf. Because we are now declared holy, the Holy Spirit can reside in us – not in a building, not in some place removed from us, but right within our very selves. When we come to true faith in Jesus, when we pray and give ourselves over to Him, the Spirit comes and dwells within us.

You might not have recognized it. You might not have been aware. If you were baptized as an infant, when you were confirmed in the church and made your statement of faith before God and the church, the Holy Spirit was given to you. He was working in you before, but now He has made His home with you. If you were baptized when you believed as an adult, He was given to you then.

Now can someone have the Spirit without being baptized? Possibly. Yet the pattern we see in Scripture is the gift of the Spirit given at baptism, that point at which we declare our faith publicly and act out of faith. That term “confirmation” means the confirmation of your baptism. The Spirit can come whenever He wants; He can work however He wants; but the pattern in Scripture is that He is sent to us at our baptism or our confirmation of that through our declaration of faith.

How important is it that you have the Holy Spirit? It’s not just important, it’s imperative. The Holy Spirit marks you as a believer. If you do not have the Holy Spirit, you are not at present a saved, redeemed, forgiven follower of Jesus who can count on eternity with Him. I don’t mean you have to be aware of Him; you might be ignorant of His presence based on what you’ve been taught. But every follower of Jesus will have the Holy Spirit. End of discussion.

The permanent, abiding presence of the Holy Spirit living in a believer separates us from the rest of the world and from those who are just fans of Jesus. Jesus has a ton of fans in this world but not a lot of followers. Fans of Jesus say, “I like Jesus a lot.” Fans of Jesus sometimes go to church when it’s convenient; often, they don’t think they need it, but when times are hard or they feel they should, they go.

Fans think of themselves as good people. They might follow biblical principles they agree with. Sometimes, they’ve been in a church for years, there because they like the fellowship or the music or something else that strikes a chord with them. Many fans of Jesus say they believe in Him, mainly as a means to an end – they think that saying they believe in Him will get them out of hell.

But it’s the Spirit that separates us out. The Spirit is given to those who commit to Jesus – who aren’t fans but followers. Followers are those who stick with Jesus when things get really rough in life, when they’re thrown for a loop. Followers get cancer and still say, “Thy will be done, Lord.” Followers bless those that curse them and say cruel things about them. Followers act on their beliefs, feeding the hungry, helping the poor, not just saying, “Be warm and well fed” but making sure it happens. Sometimes the Holy Spirit gives special gifts like the gifts of speaking in another language or prophesying about what God is doing or will do. The Spirit gives every believer some gift, we’re told. But the Holy Spirit is about more than that.

If the first reason the Holy Spirit is so important is that He marks believers as belonging to Christ, the second reason the Holy Spirit is so important is that *He empowers believers for service and is our conduit for a relationship with Christ here and now*. We don’t know exactly how Paul knew that this group of twelve men weren’t fully-fledged members of the Kingdom of God and His church, but it appears he knew that the Spirit hadn’t yet been given to them. Notice that while Paul came upon these disciples, it wasn’t mentioned that they were preaching or teaching or making more disciples. If I had to hazard a guess, the key thing missing (beyond their knowing that Jesus had come) was their lack of empowerment in the Spirit.

We do not believe in Jesus to gain power; the power we gain from the Holy Spirit isn’t the kind of power the world wants anyway. But we do receive power when we trust in Jesus with our whole hearts and follow Him. You as a disciple have power in the name of Jesus provided by the Holy Spirit.

Have you ever thought about that? You are powerful. You may have nothing; you may be broke; you may be stuck in a broke job; your hair might be broke-down; your car might be broke-down; your relationships might be broke-down. But you have power. Power to do the Lord’s will. Not in your own strength, but in the perfect power of the Lord that He promised you and has given you. What the Lord wants you to do, whatever that is, you have power to do.

Now be careful. The power of the world can sometimes mimic or mock the power of the Holy Spirit. Someone can build a big church with a big building without the Holy Spirit; it will impress, but it won’t be as effective as a thirty person church that works only in the power of the Holy Spirit. Don’t be impressed by size and numbers.

Jesus got 5,000 people to follow Him. The next day He told them a really hard truth and they all left. The night He was arrested, His twelve closest friends all ran away. He died in one of the most excruciating and embarrassing ways possible. Yet in His sacrifice, every last one of us who believes in Him is saved. In His power, we are forgiven, redeemed, and set free from sin.

The Spirit empowers us. Are you too afraid to talk to somebody about Jesus? You can't do it in your power, but you can in the power of the Spirit. Nervous about doing what's right at work when something is really wrong? You can't fix it in your power, but you can in the Spirit. Stand up for someone, feed someone when you're running low yourself, help someone when you feel helpless? All empowered by the Holy Spirit. All you need to do is let Him work. He will get you over yourself so God can do His work through you.

And because Jesus is now seated at the right hand of the Father reigning in heaven with Him, it is through the Spirit that we have a personal relationship with Jesus. When the Spirit is with us, we can know Jesus. The power that Jesus demonstrated in His earthly life came from the Spirit. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are so deeply intertwined that we cannot completely separate their actions and relationships. When the Spirit is living in us, we have communion with the entirety of God – Father, Son, and Spirit.

Now you might think: "I've been so ignorant of the Spirit – do I even have Him? Is He present with me?" The thing is, the Holy Spirit is often our silent partner. Everything the Spirit does brings glory to the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit is worthy of all our praise, but just as Jesus didn't glorify Himself but brought glory to the Father, the Holy Spirit doesn't glorify Himself but brings glory to the Father and the Son.

Whether or not you completely understand what He does or have thanked Him or even known that He was active, if you have put your faith and trust in Jesus, if you've put your life in His hands and shown it through the obedience of baptism, you have the Holy Spirit. Now that you know, honor Him. Glorify Him. Ask for His guidance, and He will give it. He's been there; whether you've known it or not, you have been a temple, a dwelling place for the Lord. Now that you know, treat yourself like a home for your King.

Sometimes we've also been freaked out about the Holy Spirit by some Christians who have said that we must speak in tongues or must prophecy to "prove" we have the Holy Spirit. Now I'm going to tell you one thing I know: it's a really bad idea to "make" God "prove" anything. The Spirit gives us whatever gifts whenever He wants, gifts that will help the Kingdom of God, and you don't need to worry what gifts He does or doesn't give you. Pray for whatever gifts will make you an effective servant of the Kingdom.

As today's passage concludes, we see Paul moving on, preaching in the synagogue and eventually in a lecture hall for nearly two years. Everyone in the province of Asia heard the Word of the Lord, the good news about Jesus. That's the Spirit's power showing itself through Paul. And that's our final question today: will you help and not hinder the Spirit's work so that God is glorified through you? You were made to honor God. Let the Spirit work through the gifts He's given you so that you shine brighter and bolder than the biggest church building for Him. Let the Spirit speak through you so the world may know that Jesus is Savior and Lord.