

# Looking to Christ

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**Littlebourne - 13th August 2023 - Acts 19:1-10**

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Last time, we saw the end of Paul's second missionary journey - he has returned home to Antioch. Then he set out again into Galatia and Phrygia, starting his third missionary journey in verse 23.

## v1

*And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples.*

You might remember from last week that Apollos was at Ephesus, where he preached and taught. Luke records that he taught accurately, but he met Aquila and Priscilla and they explained to him things even more accurately. He was teaching the right thing, but incomplete. Verse 25 says he only knew the baptism of John.

Now Paul gets to Ephesus, having travelled through Galatia and Phrygia, and finds disciples. In the previous chapter, he left behind Aquila and Priscilla there, but didn't stay long himself - he just went to the synagogue briefly, then set sail again. Since he's been gone, some people - twelve men as we see later - have believed, after Apollos brought them the message.

Ephesus was the capital of the Roman province of Asia, having been founded by ancient Greeks around 12 centuries earlier, and was a powerful city for a long time. According to Strabo, Greek geographer of the time, Ephesus was second in importance and size only to Rome. One of the most important aspects of Ephesus was the large temple there, built to honour Artemis, Greek goddess of fertility, which will feature later in the chapter.

These few men in Ephesus that have believed, Paul now addresses.

## v2-7

*2 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." 3 And he said, "Into what then were you baptised?" They said, "Into John's baptism." 4 And Paul said, "John baptised with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus." 5 On hearing this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. 6 And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. 7 There were about twelve men in all.*

It's something of a familiar story in Acts. We've seen before believers who have heard the message, but not received the Holy Spirit. At least not for long.

Chapter 8 tells us about Philip's travel to Samaria, where gentiles believe. Soon after, when Peter and John arrive, the Holy Spirit arrives in power too and these new believers receive the Holy Spirit and start speaking in tongues. Chapter 10, as the gospel spreads to gentiles, and the Holy Spirit's bestowing of gifts follows close behind.

The pattern for the early parts of Acts was that an ever larger group of people would believe, first those Jews in Jerusalem, then out to the surrounding areas, then Samaritans, who were closer to Jewish customs than most, then outward further to gentiles. The gospel spread outwards geographically, and genetically. And with this spread, we saw the Holy Spirit giving people the ability to speak in tongues and other gifts, authenticating the belief of these groups of believers. At every turn, in order to show that, yes really these people too can be saved, the Holy Spirit confirms with powerful signs through these people.

Now these believers in Ephesus haven't even heard about the Holy Spirit. They don't know about Him. They have the baptism of John, they've heard only what Apollos knew, who taught John's baptism.

What's going on here? What is the difference between John's baptism and this 're-baptism' they do in Jesus' name? What on earth is happening?

Paul's initial question is whether they have received the Holy Spirit. Ever since Pentecost, we've seen each group that comes to saving faith received the Holy Spirit and was authenticated by the Holy Spirit's presence amongst them. That these men have not even hear of the Holy Spirit indicates that something major is amiss. So Paul digs deeper - "into what then were you baptised?".

The answer reveals what is going on - they were baptised in the manner of John's baptism. They're stuck at the level of what John the Baptist taught and did. Whatever Priscilla and Aquila explained to Apollos hasn't made it to these guys, they've got old news.

## John the Baptist

If I asked you who the greatest Old Testament prophet was, who would you say? There's plenty to pick from and it might be hard to choose. Jesus said in Matthew 11 (v9-11):

*What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.  
10 This is he of whom it is written,*

*“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,  
who will prepare your way before you.”*

*11 Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater  
than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater  
than he.*

This gives us a clue - John is greater than the other prophets that have arisen, because he prepares the way. Jesus is citing Malachi 3:1, talking about the coming of the Lord.

But is John an Old Testament prophet though? He's not in the Old Testament books, only mentioned in the books of the New Testament. Well he's written about in the books of the New Testament, but he is the last of the long line of Old Testament prophets, part of the Old Testament way of things. His job is to prepare the way of the Lord, to encourage the people to cleanse themselves for the coming of the Messiah. He is in a sense the last and greatest Old Testament prophet.

## John's baptism, Jesus' baptism

When John baptised people, it wasn't a brand new thing. He didn't invent the procedure. What he did was take a ritual that was part of the process for a gentile convert to Judaism, and apply it to the Jews as well. He was in effect saying that even those that think they're ready for the coming Messiah, that are in the club, that have the birth certificate to prove it, need to cleanse themselves too. Genetics aren't good enough - you need to repent and live for God, because judgement is coming, the Messiah's return is imminent. Fundamentally, John's baptism was looking forward to Christ's arrival, at any moment, and was about getting right for that.

Now, in the New Covenant way of doing things, our baptism is not so much a baptism of cleansing, of repentance, but one that acts as a sign of what has already happened. We don't get baptised because we want forgiveness - we get baptised to show we are forgiven. Our baptism now doesn't look forward to the time when forgiveness will come, it looks back to the time when forgiveness was purchased on the cross, to the death and resurrection of Christ.

Jesus told the disciples to baptise in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit - if the men in Ephesus didn't know about the Holy Spirit, that shows they're operating on the basis of knowledge that came before the giving of the great commission and Pentecost.

It seems that Paul realises the issue and explains what they have wrong - they are rightly looking forward to the Messiah - Paul tells them it's Jesus. John spoke of He who was to come - well He has a name and it's Jesus, and presumably at this point Paul fills them in on the whole story, Holy Spirit and all.

On hearing about all this they are baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus - they believe in what Christ has done for them and they are baptised accordingly.

## The Holy Spirit's multifaceted work

Then, much as we see elsewhere in Acts, they are filled with the Holy Spirit and there are confirming works of the Spirit to confirm this.

Those of you that have been at St Andrew's over the last few years probably know the mnemonic - North, East, South, West - for the different things the Holy Spirit does for us.

- North - New life, that is regeneration and application of salvation to us.
- South - Sanctification, that is the ongoing work of conforming us to Christ, becoming better people.
- East - Empowerment, that is the outward and often more obvious work of the Spirit to empower us in certain works, or Spiritual gifts.
- West - We / fellowship, that is the Spirit unites us all together in a way that is more than just the earthly relationships we have.

The work of the Holy Spirit is much more than just these outward signs - the real difference in these men was not that they gained the miraculous power to speak in other languages, but that they were reborn. They received new life.

## v8-10

*8 And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. 9 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. 10 This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.*

Paul now looks to find converts in the synagogue, as he often does. But as we've seen many times in Acts as well, he faces opposition. The Jews are stubborn, and refuse to listen to Paul.

Paul turns his attention instead to a meeting place of the gentiles - the hall of Tyrannus. We don't know who Tyrannus was, or what this hall was, but Paul sets up his ministry there and continues to minister to Ephesus for two years, the result being that word spreads far and wide. People from all of Asia - a large region - hear the word of the Lord from Paul. We know that churches form all over Asia - the seven churches written to in Revelation are all in this area, as is Colossae, to whose church Paul later writes the letter to the Colossians.

## Conclusion

Through the book of Acts we've observed that there are not really any neutral reactions to the gospel. Here, we see that those that looked forward to Christ, but didn't know the whole story yet, had a very positive outcome. But there were those that heard Paul, one of the most gifted teachers in church history no doubt, in the synagogue for three whole months, and still rejected the message, in fact hardened in their opposition to it.

1 Corinthians 1:18:

*For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

What exactly is the difference between those that take the gospel as good news and those that don't? Why do some hear that salvation is a free gift and rejoice, whilst others bristle at the idea?

Part of the answer is that the Holy Spirit indwells those that are saved. As mentioned, there are multiple aspects to the Spirit's work in us, the first and chief work being that of regeneration - of bringing dead sinners to spiritual life.

We might not experience the same sort of powerful signs that occur many times in Acts. But we should recognise that without the Holy Spirit, we're dead - we are not capable of saving ourselves.

In baptism, we symbolically represent this - we go down into the water and are raised up again. We pass through the water, like the Israelites through the red sea, going from slavery to freedom, from death to life. We're like Noah, who went from a world destined for destruction through the waters to a world of promise and covenant with God.

Romans 6:4:

*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.*

Baptism is representative of this - it doesn't itself do this for us. It's a sign and seal of what God has done for us. It points us towards Christ's death and resurrection and the Spirit's application of this to ourselves.

The wonder of the gospel is that it's all done for us - we don't have to be like the disciples of John, looking forward to a time when things would be completed. Rather, we look at the completed work of Christ. It's done, complete, no more required. The final and once-for-all work is finished and we don't need to contribute anything.