

# Spiritual Questions

Acts 19:1-7

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Some passages of scripture are wonderfully clear, serving as a light in the darkness. Think of verses like John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me." Or 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." There are lots of wonderfully clear verses in scripture that help to clarify and inform us about what is true and how we should go.

Our passage today isn't one of those passages. Today, we're going to look at only a few verses, because this passage seems to raise as many questions (if not more) as it answers. So, I want to slow down today and take some time to ask, and hopefully answer, some of the questions raised by this passage.

## Paul's Journey to Ephesus

Last week we looked at Paul's trip back to Jerusalem and Antioch and the beginning of his third missionary journey as he traveled back through some of the churches he had planted previously. We were also introduced to Apollos, who was zealous in preaching but knew only about the message of John the Baptist. After Priscilla and Aquila instructed him more fully in the gospel message, he believed and became a great asset to the church. This week, we pick back up with Paul's travels as he made his way toward Ephesus.

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul traveled through the interior regions until he reached Ephesus, on the coast, where he found several believers. <sup>2</sup> "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" he asked them. "No," they replied, "we haven't even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." <sup>3</sup> "Then what baptism did you experience?" he asked. And they replied, "The baptism of John." <sup>4</sup> Paul said, "John's baptism called for repentance from sin. But John himself told the people to believe in the one who would come later, meaning Jesus." (Acts 19:1-4, NLT)

Luke reminds us that Apollos had left Ephesus and traveled to Corinth to minister there. At the same time, Paul was making his way toward Ephesus. We mentioned last week that Paul was able to travel through some new ground, as he had previously been unable to travel into the province of Asia. Now the Lord was allowing him to travel through those regions.

Somewhat surprisingly, we are not told that Paul stopped in any of the cities of the region to preach. We can reasonably assume he stopped in several cities along the way and spent the night, but we do not have any record of him building churches in these cities. It seems that Paul really wanted to get to Ephesus, which makes sense, since Ephesus was a very large city and a significant seaport in the region. It could be (and would become) a significant base of operations for a worldwide ministry. So it's not surprising that Paul seemed to be marching resolutely toward Ephesus. But before he

began the major thrust of his ministry, it appears he encountered people who were open to the gospel but did not know the fullness of it.

In the NLT, these people are described as “believers”, though the underlying word in Greek simply means “disciples”. So, while these people seem to have embraced the message of John the Baptist, it appears they did not know about Jesus. Paul’s encounter with these disciples raises several important theological questions.

## **What Is a Christian?**

The first question raised by this passage is what does it mean to be a Christian? Or what is necessary for a person to be saved from their sin and go to Heaven? This is an extremely important question, and one our society seems unable to answer.

This passage does not answer the question directly, but other passages do. Earlier I mentioned John 14:6, where Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one can come to the Father except through me.” This is one of the clearest explanations of what is necessary for a person to be saved. It tells us that there is only one way to Heaven, only one way to the Father, and that is through Jesus.

So, how does a person get to Heaven through Jesus? In his letter to the Romans, Paul gives us a clear answer.

If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup> For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved. (Romans 10:9-10, NLT)

When we take these two passages together, we understand that the only way for a person to be forgiven and saved of their sin is to trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ. In other words, we must believe that Jesus is Lord and that God raised Him from the dead, enabling Him to pay the penalty of our sins once and for all.

What does it mean to declare that Jesus is Lord? It means recognizing that He is the One who has the right to set the course of our lives. It means we stop trying to act as though we are in control and instead submit our lives to Christ.

Many object to this truth, claiming it to be close-minded and mean-spirited. They argue this isn’t fair to those who have never heard of Jesus, so God must provide an alternate means to be saved as well. Some have gone so far as to conclude that God will be gracious to those who worship other gods because they are worshiping Him according to what they know. By this logic, Muslims, Hindus, and people worshiping tribal gods can be saved because they are worshiping God in their own way. But if that were true, we would expect to see the same principle at work in God’s dealings with the Egyptians and Romans. That isn’t what we see in scripture. These people were condemned because they were worshiping false gods instead of the true God.

Peter didn’t mince words when he spoke earlier in Acts,

<sup>12</sup> There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12, NLT)

How is this fair? Romans 1 says that while not every person knows about Jesus, we all know enough about God to know in our hearts what is right and wrong—and we all choose to rebel against Him. We may not have complete knowledge, but we have chosen to reject the knowledge we have, so each of us stands guilty.

The world needs Jesus. He is their only hope. Jesus did say that those who seek Him will find Him, and I believe God will reveal Himself to those who want to know Him. While God may use miraculous means to communicate with people, most often we are the means He will use to bring people to salvation. This truth should fuel our desire to share the gospel, and it should fuel our passion for world missions.

While the men Paul encountered may have been open to the gospel, they had not trusted in Jesus as Lord and did not believe the Father had raised Him from the dead. Thus, they were not Christians. The only means of salvation is to believe in and submit to the Jesus revealed to us in scripture. Any other attempts to reach God are futile.

## **How Do You Receive the Holy Spirit?**

The second big question raised by this passage is about the Holy Spirit. Paul asked if these men had received the Holy Spirit when they believed. They had not, because they said they didn’t even know there was a Holy Spirit. As Paul pushed further, he asked what baptism they had received, and they explained that they had experienced John’s baptism. Paul explained that John’s baptism called people to repent but was intended to point forward to the coming of the Messiah, namely Jesus.

These men seemed confused about what Paul was talking about when he asked about the Holy Spirit, even though John the Baptist had talked about the coming of the Spirit. This isn’t surprising. Until someone explains it to you (and often even after), it’s a foreign concept.

Here’s what the Bible teaches us. There is one God, but He exists as three distinct persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When the Son came to earth as a man, He was known as Jesus, so we use the terms “the Son” and “Jesus” interchangeably. Even though He is described as “the Son”, He was not created by the Father, but this describes a relationship of mutual submission. All three persons of the Godhead have always existed and will always exist. This three-in-one nature of God, though mind boggling to us, is an essential element of who He is.

The Holy Spirit is the third person of the trinity the term we use to refer to God’s three-in-one nature). When Jesus ascended into Heaven at the beginning of Acts, He told the disciples that the Holy Spirit would descend upon them and assist them. And on the day of Pentecost, that’s exactly what happened. The Holy Spirit fell upon the disciples and enabled them to speak boldly and do miraculous signs. We have consistently seen the Holy Spirit at work in the book of Acts, as He guided the disciples (preventing Paul from

traveling in this region until now), enabled them to perform miracles and drive out demons, and spoke boldly through them, allowing them to speak truth to people who needed to hear it.

The big question is how or when does a person receive the Spirit? This passage doesn't make it clear.

<sup>5</sup> As soon as they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

<sup>6</sup> Then when Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in other tongues and prophesied. <sup>7</sup> There were about twelve men in all. (Acts 19:5-7, NLT)

They were baptized in the name of Jesus, and when Paul laid his hands on them the Holy Spirit came upon them. Apparently, these men chose to trust in Jesus after Paul explained the message to them, and they were baptized as believers. But the Spirit didn't come upon them until after Paul had laid his hands on them.

This raises questions: is it necessary to be baptized for the Spirit to be in your life? Do you have to be given the Spirit by someone who has the authority to do so? Or is there something else at play here?

The challenge with the book of Acts is that it is narrative, not necessarily instructive. Acts records what happened, generally without making much theological observation about it. As such, we have to be careful about building theology from singular occurrences and concluding that because God acted one way in a specific circumstance it must be the way He will always act.

Acts records four different accounts similar to this one. Each one marked the beginning of a new stage of ministry. The first was in Jerusalem (Acts 2), the second was in Samaria (Acts 8), the third was with Gentiles (Acts 10), and then here we see something similar with dispersed Jews.

Even among these accounts, how and when people received the Spirit differed. In some cases it happened immediately after the people were baptized, and in others it happened when they believed, before they were baptized. And in this instance, it appears not to happen until Paul laid his hands on them. So what are we to understand about receiving the Holy Spirit?

Christians have different views about this issue, but I don't believe it is as complicated as some people make it. I believe each of these occurrences in Acts were unique occurrences, where God was initiating a new phase of gospel ministry. Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians that the Holy Spirit takes up residence in the life of every believer. Nowhere does the Bible teach that you must do something beyond trusting in Christ to receive the Holy Spirit. While we see examples of things happening differently in Acts, the Bible does not teach us that we need to do something "extra" to receive the Spirit. And if there were something we needed to do in to have the Holy Spirit in our lives, you would expect this to be clearly explained in scripture. So, I believe that generally

speaking, each person who genuinely trusts in Christ receives the Holy Spirit at the moment they believe. We don't have to wait until we are baptized (though I believe the Holy Spirit will lead us to get baptized after we believe) and we don't have to have someone "enable" us to have the Spirit.

How we live will affect how much we experience the Spirit's influence in our lives, but nothing in scripture indicates that we need to do something special to receive the fullness of the Spirit in our lives or that we can lose the Spirit. What seems clear to me is that the more we listen to Him, the more we will experience the Holy Spirit filling and leading us. This is not something mystical and esoteric, it is actually fairly straightforward—the more we yield to the Spirit, the more we will experience His power.

## **How Do We Know if We Have the Spirit?**

But that leads to the final question this passage raises: How can we know we have the Spirit in our lives? Some would tell you that the evidence of the Spirit's presence is speaking in tongues and prophesying. After all, that is what happened in the case of these individuals in Acts 19. We also see similar experiences elsewhere in Acts. But that is not always what happens, even in Acts. I believe those who tell you that the only way to know the Holy Spirit is active in your life is if you speak in tongues (languages you do not know) are mistaken.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul asks some rhetorical questions that shed light on this issue.

<sup>29</sup> Are we all apostles? Are we all prophets? Are we all teachers? Do we all have the power to do miracles? <sup>30</sup> Do we all have the gift of healing? Do we all have the ability to speak in unknown languages? Do we all have the ability to interpret unknown languages? Of course not! (1 Corinthians 12:29-30, NLT)

Paul seems to say that the Spirit gives different abilities to different believers, though He enables each believer to serve the Lord uniquely.

<sup>7</sup> A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other. (1 Corinthians 12:7, NLT)

One way to know we have the Spirit in us is if we find abilities He has given us to serve the body of Christ (the Church). He enables every believer to serve Him faithfully. What that looks like will be different for each person, but the Spirit empowers us all to serve.

The other significant evidence of the Spirit's influence in our lives is not as flashy, but just as important. When the Holy Spirit comes upon a person, their lives begin to look different. He leads us to live differently.

<sup>22</sup> But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! (Galatians 5:22-23, NLT)

The Holy Spirit works to change us from the inside out. He may not give every person the ability to perform miracles, to speak in strange languages, or to speak boldly to crowds. But He does enable each of us to serve the Lord more fully. He leads us to a

place of submission and transformation. And one of the best ways to know if the Holy Spirit is in you is to see if this kind of fruit is growing in your life. Every believer has the Spirit in them, so every believer should see these two things: growth in holiness and growth in our ability to serve the Lord. That is the primary goal of the Spirit—to make us holy and to build up the body of Christ, so that in all things we might bring glory to God.

## Conclusion

I know this sermon is a bit different than much of what we have done in Acts, but I think it is important to be clear on these foundational issues. Many today want to muddy the waters on these issues, so I want you to be clear on them. With that said, I want to leave you with some lessons I believe we learn from this passage.

**First, we must each decide what we will do with Jesus.** Ultimately there are only two options: we can either submit to Jesus as Lord, or we can cast Him aside in the hopes that it will be ok. Scripture is abundantly clear on this: there is only one means of salvation, and that is by trusting in and submitting to Jesus Christ. No one can make that decision for you, so decide for yourself where you stand today.

**Second, there is an urgency to the gospel.** If the only means of salvation is through Jesus, then people need to know Him! We should desire to see the gospel shared with everyone. We can help this by telling our family, our friends, our neighbors, and our co-workers about Him. We should recognize the stakes and make sure people have the information they need to decide what they will do with Jesus. But it should also drive us to bring the gospel to the people who have never heard it before. This means we should support (and maybe even join!) the work of missionaries who are carrying the message to people in every corner of the globe. If we recognize the exclusivity of the gospel message, we should also see an urgency in it.

**Finally, if we are believers, we should live in the Spirit's power.** Those who have trusted Christ and are seeking to live for Him have the Holy Spirit at work within them. But the scriptures teach us that His influence in our lives depends greatly upon our willingness to allow Him to work. This means we should listen to His leading as He guides us. In my experience, His leading is often in whispers to my heart, through revealing scripture to us, or by using others to push us. The point is that if we want to hear His leading, we must be willing to listen. He may show us things we need to change in our lives, He may push us to serve the Lord in ways that stretch us, He may lead us to go in one direction instead of another. Every believer can experience the Spirit's ministry, but to do so we must be willing to follow Him.

Not every passage is abundantly clear, but every passage has something to teach us. My hope is that by looking at these 12 men and their encounter with Paul today, you will find guidance for your life, and will submit to Christ and follow the leading of the Spirit each day, because it is the only way to experience life as God intended, both in this life and the next.

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