

Do You Want to Experience the Holy Spirit?

Acts 19:1-20

This morning as we return to our study of the book of Acts, I'll begin with a question: ***Do you want to experience the Holy Spirit?*** I have in mind the full range of things that we're told the Spirit wants to do in our lives: indwell us, convict us of sin and lead us in the ways of obedience, produce the fruit of the Spirit, etc. Do you want to experience everything the Holy Spirit has for you?

I truly hope that you do because we cannot begin to live the Christian life in our own. Most of us have tried it with disastrous results. We don't have the power or the resolve or the wisdom to do the things that God has called us to do. Therefore we should have a deep longing to experience the Holy Spirit as fully as possible.

Now the question becomes, ***What needs to be true of me if I want to experience the Holy Spirit?*** That is the question that today's passage answers. Acts 19:1-20 explains how two different sets of people were deficient in their understanding of the Holy Spirit and therefore failed to experience the Holy Spirit. Even though their understanding of the Holy Spirit was deficient in very different ways, they both needed to understand the same thing: ***To experience the Holy Spirit, we must be rightly related to the Lord Jesus.***

This makes total sense in light of Jesus' statement in John 16:14. There he said of the Holy Spirit, "He will glorify me. . ." The Spirit will show people just how glorious Jesus is. Therefore it's not surprising that if we want to experience the Holy Spirit, we must be rightly related to Jesus.

The first event (in verses 1 through 7) shows that:

We are given the gift of the Holy Spirit at conversion when we believe in Jesus.

Acts 19:1-7

Acts 19 takes place in the city of Ephesus (which is located in the western part of modern-day Turkey). Ephesus was a city of around 200,000 people, the third largest city in the Roman Empire. Paul spent more time in Ephesus than any other city where his team established a church. Let's pick up Luke's narrative in 19:1.

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

Since everywhere in Acts the term disciples refers to followers of Jesus, I think that's how we should understand it here. Paul encountered people who considered themselves followers of Jesus. But apparently there was something deficient or "off" about these disciples, because Paul felt the need to question them about their experience of the Holy Spirit. It might have been something they said or something they did. But here's how the conversation went:

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.”

They were probably saying that they hadn’t heard that the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon those who believed in Jesus, not that they were completely ignorant of the existence of the Holy Spirit.

3 And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They said, “Into John’s baptism.”

4 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.”

John baptized people in the Jordan River as an expression of repentance in preparation for the Messiah. In essence he told people to turn from their sins and turn back to God; when the Messiah comes, believe in him. He told people, “I baptize you with water. . . but the one who comes after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. . . believe in Him.” (See John 1:7, 26-27, 33). Repentance alone isn’t enough. It’s not enough to turn from your sins; you also have to believe in Jesus. John 1:12 says that “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who believe in His name.” These disciples in Ephesus had repented, but they hadn’t believed in Jesus. Since they weren’t rightly related to Jesus, they hadn’t experienced the Holy Spirit.

5 On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Throughout the book of Acts, three things are associated with conversion: repentance (turning from sin), faith (believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus), and baptism (a public expression of that person’s loyalty to Jesus). When only one or two of these three elements are mentioned (as here), the other element(s) are implied. Here, the fact that they were baptized presupposes that they had believed in Jesus.

Note that these “disciples” were “baptized in the **name** of the Lord Jesus.” We’ll see this phrase “the name of the Lord Jesus” again in verses 13 and 17. The **name** of Jesus signifies everything he is and everything he does. Being baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus signifies a comprehensive commitment to following him as Lord. At the baptism in 4 weeks (on October 15th), those being baptized are also declaring, “With God’s help, it is my intention to follow Jesus throughout this life whatever the cost.”

We see in verse 6 that these disciples experienced something very similar to what the original disciples experienced on the Day of Pentecost.

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.

There isn’t a formula or a set order in the book of Acts for a person’s experience of the Holy Spirit at their conversion. Here the Holy Spirit “came upon them” after they had been baptized; on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit fell upon them before they were baptized. Both here and at Pentecost one tangible evidence that they had received the Holy Spirit was “speaking in tongues” (which in Acts 2 involved speaking known

languages they had never learned); but the gift of tongues isn't mentioned in most conversion accounts in Acts. There is variety when it comes to manifestations of the Spirit.

The significant thing to note is that it's always the case that ***We are given the gift of the Holy Spirit at conversion when we believe in Jesus.*** So if you want to experience the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, your first response needs to be ***faith***.

Our response: ***faith***. Like the disciples at Ephesus, you not only need to repent; you also need to believe that Jesus died for your sin and was raised on the third day. When you believe you are rightly related to Jesus and you are given the promised Holy Spirit.

I want to be careful how I say this. . . But if you grew up going to church, and you sincerely try not to sin, and you try to live a moral life. . . but you still have no peace with God and no assurance that your sin has been wiped away and that you will escape the wrath of God, it may be that you have never trusted in Jesus alone for salvation. Of course, if you lack peace with God and assurance of salvation, there could be other things at play (e.g., habitual sin). But it may be that you have never believed in Christ alone for your salvation. As Paul told the Philippian jailor (16:31), "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved."

The second event (in verses 8 through 20) shows that:

We experience the fulness of the Holy Spirit as we submit to the Lord Jesus. Acts 19:8-20

I am using the word fulness to mean the full ministry of the Holy Spirit as described in the Scriptures: victory over the forces of darkness, the power to bear witness for Jesus, the conviction of sin, the illumination of Scripture, etc. We see all of this in this passage.

Verses 8 through 10 describe how in Ephesus Paul continued his normal pattern of preaching the gospel "to the Jews first" (Romans 1:16); he entered the synagogue and for three months he reasoned and tried to persuade them that God was establishing his Kingdom through Jesus the Messiah. When the Jews there became increasingly resistant and slanderous about "the Way" (i.e. the way of Christ), he withdrew and began teaching daily in a venue/hall owned by a man named Tyrannus. Luke tells us the scope and reach of Paul's influence in verse 10:

10 This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

Even though there was opposition, many, many people heard and believed "the word of the Lord." In verses 11 and 12 Luke describes how God was doing unusual, extraordinary miracles through Paul. Luke is very nuanced in the way he describes what happened.

11 And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul,

Paul wasn't "doing miracles" in his own power; **God** was doing miracles through Paul ("by the hands of Paul). And they weren't ordinary miracles; they were extraordinary (or "no ordinary") miracles. Here's what Luke is talking about:

12 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.

The handkerchiefs and aprons were probably items that Paul used in his tent making business. Handkerchiefs were used to wipe away sweat, and aprons were worn to protect your clothes. These items that touched Paul's skin were carried away to the sick. The result was that "their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them."

Again, this is not ordinary or normative. There's no suggestion that if you are holy enough that whatever touches your skin can heal/deliver people. At the same time, this type of miracle is not without precedent. You may remember that in Luke 8:44 that a woman touched the hem of Jesus' robe and was healed (see also Luke 6:19). As well, in Acts 5:15 we read that people laid the sick in the street so that "at least [Peter's] shadow might fall upon some of them" as he walked by. God obviously has a right to do "extraordinary miracles" whenever he wants, even today.

If Luke hadn't told us that **God** was doing these miracles, we might think that it was a display of magic, which by definition involves invoking or manifesting supernatural powers by use of rituals and incantations. Luke next mentions that there were some traveling Jewish exorcists in Ephesus who didn't understand that Paul's power was inextricably bound up with his devotion to Jesus; and so they tried to imitate Paul in some respects, thinking that they could invoke the name of the Lord Jesus to cast out evil spirits.

13 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."

This is how they earned their living, by traveling around casting out evil spirits. They had monetized this ministry for personal gain. They were syncretistic, mixing Judaism with magic arts. They themselves didn't believe in and proclaim Jesus as Lord. They said, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom **Paul** proclaims." They didn't understand that they needed to be rightly related to Jesus to invoke/speak his name.

14 Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this.

This was the family business, likely very lucrative. Satan is a liar, but we see in numerous places that evil spirits (his assistants) sometimes speak the truth without mincing words (see Acts 16:16-17, Luke 4:34). That was certainly the case here:

15 But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" 16 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.

They weren't the least bit intimidated by people with a second-hand knowledge of Jesus. By contrast, back in Acts 16, Paul had told the evil spirit residing in a servant girl, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ, come out of her," and it obeyed (See 16:16-18). Because Paul was rightly related to Jesus, he exhibited the power of the Holy Spirit when he confronted evil spirits in the name of the Lord Jesus. But when the sons of Sceva tried to appropriate the name of the Lord Jesus as an incantation, they ended up "naked and wounded."

Luke mentions two specific responses as word of this incident spread. Both of these responses involve people becoming rightly related to Jesus and therefore experiencing the Holy Spirit. The first response was. . .

Response #1: ***The fear of the Lord***. Luke tell us that when people heard what had happened, fear fell upon them all.

17 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.

Luke isn't saying that everybody who heard what had happened to the sons of Sceva became followers of Christ. Rather, it was a widespread realization that Jesus and Paul were known and feared in the unseen spiritual realm. James 2:19 tells us that "the demons believe [in the existence of God and Jesus his Son] and tremble!" But since the sons of Sceva weren't rightly related to Jesus, they got mauled. When that became known "fear fell upon them all" (see also Acts 5:11 and the fear that came upon the church after the deaths of Ananias and Saphira). And "the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled"; his reputation swelled among the people.

Those who ***didn't*** know Jesus were likely wondering, "Do I really want to be on the wrong side of Jesus who is known and feared by demons?" And those who ***did*** know Jesus were likely thinking, "Is there anything in my life analogous to the presumption of the sons of Sceva? I call him the Lord Jesus, but is there anything not submitted to his Lordship?"

This leads us to the second response:

Response #2: ***Costly repentance***. Proverbs 16:6 says, ". . . by the fear of the Lord one turns away from evil." Luke tells us in verse 17 that many of those who were genuine believers in Ephesus had continued practicing "magic arts" alongside their Christianity. But the fear of the Lord that fell upon them prompted them to turn from their sin in a very decisive and costly way.

18 Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. 19 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.

These believers not only “confessed and divulged” their practices; they also burned publicly the books that contained magic rituals and incantations and such. They didn’t sell them to their friends at a discounted price. They burned them publicly. If the 50,000 pieces of silver were denarii, the books burned were worth what a worker would make in 137 years (since a denarius was an average worker’s daily wage). So this was costly repentance, akin to metaphorically cutting off your right hand if it causes you to stumble (see Matthew 5:30).

20 So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

“The word of the Lord” is a reference to the message about Jesus (see also 6:7 and 12:24). Luke is telling us that the success of the gospel flowed from the fear of the Lord and the costly repentance of believers. As they submitted to the Lordship of Jesus, they experienced the fullness of the Spirit and their witness had a powerful effect upon others. The same thing is true of us:

We experience the fulness of the Holy Spirit as we submit to the Lord Jesus. And as we experience the fulness of the Spirit, our witness is more compelling to others.

By way of application, I’d like you to do something rather simple here and now, and then something that will probably be more complex after you leave here today. First, in response to this passage, identify anything in your life analogous to the “magic arts” practiced by the believers in Ephesus. In other words, identify anything in your life that is obviously incompatible with the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

When Paul wrote the churches, he gave them lists of things incompatible with holiness. These lists are profitable because we tend to be selective when it comes to things we think are “really bad sins.” These lists don’t give us anywhere to hide; they list what we might consider more “respectable sins.” Listen, for example, to Paul’s list in Galatians 5. Do you practice any of these “works/deeds of the flesh”?

19 Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 21 envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. . .

Can you identify any of these “works of the flesh” in your life? If so, you’ve identified an area of your life that you need to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Identifying something is relatively simple.

What comes next might be more complex: In days and weeks ahead, invite the Holy Spirit to show you what it means to fear the Lord and what costly repentance might look like in relation to the specific deed of the flesh you’ve identified in your life. I’d encourage you to talk with a trusted brother or sister in Christ so that they can pray with/for you (and if needed speak the truth to you in love). Don’t be afraid of costly repentance. Repentance is a gift from God that allows us to experience the fulness of the Holy Spirit.