

In our passage last time we read of the end of Paul's second missionary journey, and the beginning of his third. Ephesus was the last major city Paul evangelized before returning to Jerusalem, and then to his home church in Antioch.

When Paul left Ephesus, God sent Apollos to minister to the church. We will see in our passage this evening, that when Apollos went to Corinth, another of Paul's church plants, God sent Paul back to Ephesus, where he ministered for more than two years. We see God's sovereign hand at work in the lives and ministries of both men, as well as God's grace extended to the churches.

Today, God continues to work his sovereign will to advance His kingdom, and to edify the church. When the people of a church serve the Lord with pure hearts, and they are submitted to the will of God, and the movement of His Holy Spirit, God pours out His blessings, and the church flourishes.

In tonight's passage we will read of some events in Ephesus that set up a theological challenge for some people, but if we keep everything in proper context, this passage becomes easy to understand. Please read with me, Acts 9:1-10.

In our passage last time we read about the start of Paul's third missionary journey where he traveled throughout Galatia and Phrygia. In the Southwestern portion of this area lies the city of Ephesus. Paul told the brothers there that, if it were God's will, he would return to them to further instruct and encourage them. When Apollos went to Corinth, God called Paul back to Ephesus, where he enjoyed his longest ministry with any of the churches he planted.

Upon his arrival, Paul met some disciples. Whether they were Disciples of Christ at that time, or just disciples of John the Baptist, the bible does not say specifically, but context suggests that they were followers of the teaching of John the Baptist, but did not yet have a full understanding of the gospel. Their hearts were certainly open to the things of God, but just like we saw with Apollos, they needed additional instruction.

In our culture I often speak with folks who are really good people. They believe in God. They want to do the right things, but for whatever reason, they have an incomplete knowledge of the gospel message, that we are all sinners, in need of a Savior. Perhaps they have heard that Jesus died for our sins, but they have not quite reached the point of understanding the very personal nature of Jesus' sacrifice, nor have they completely surrendered their life to Him in faith.

Not only is this true of people we run into as we conduct the daily business of life, I fear that even some people in the church fall into this category. They are good people who love God, but they still lack a personal experience with Christ that causes them to be born again.

I have friends and family members, that I have a burden for their salvation. They are good people, people that I truly like and love. I don't wish to offend them, or to so turn them off that they don't want to be around me, but my concern for their eternal souls runs deep, because I fear that they have an incomplete knowledge of the gospel, and they will remain lost in their sins, if I do not help them to understand the truth. So I pray for them, and look for opportunities to share the knowledge of the gospel in a challenging but non-threatening way.

Paul asks them a diagnostic question, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" That is a great question because the bible teaches us that when a person prays to receive Christ into his or her heart, that God sets His seal of ownership on that person, and indwells them with His Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the personal spiritual presence of Christ

that shapes a believer according to God's will. The Holy Spirit teaches us. He convicts us when we are tempted. He gifts us and empowers us for service. Through the Holy Spirit, God pours out His grace in our lives to equip us for righteousness and service. The Spirit of God makes our lives wonderful, in spite of our circumstances, and the promise of eternal life becomes a settled reality in our hearts.

These disciples, however, had not been baptized into Christ, but rather received a baptism of repentance from sins, as taught by John the Baptist. Repentance of sins is an important element in the salvation process, but being born again requires a complete trust and faith in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice for our sins. We believe that Jesus was God in the flesh, who lived as a man, experienced life just as we do, but remained without sin. The bible says that Jesus became sin for us. He came for the purpose of offering His own body as the only suitable sacrifice, acceptable to God. He died, not for His own sin, but for the sin of the whole world. We further believe that after three days and three nights in a tomb, He arose from the grave, showed Himself to hundreds of eyewitnesses, ascended into heaven, where He sits at the right hand of God making intercession for all who trust in Him. We further believe, that in fulfillment of prophesy, He is coming again, and it might be soon.

This passage of scripture forces us to reflect on some key questions. Was the disciple's first baptism without effect? We also have here a biblical example of people who were re-baptized. Today, should people who have been baptized at an earlier stage of life get re-baptized when they join a church, or make a fresh commitment of their life to the Lord? Some might even question why baptism is important to begin with?

When we take into account the whole of scripture, baptism is not what saves a person, but once a person is saved, it is good, honorable, and pleasing to the Lord to be baptized into the body of Christ. Baptism is an act of commitment, and faith, that symbolizes a believer's spiritual sharing in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We baptize because Jesus said as you go and make disciples, baptize them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and teach them all the things that I have taught you.

When counseling someone who was baptized at an earlier age, or who is coming from another church, or denomination, as to whether they need to be baptized again, I ask questions like, "Were you saved before you were baptized, were you born again, did you receive the Holy Spirit, before you were baptized?" If a person was baptized as a believer, there is no need to be baptized again. If they were not sincere in their profession of faith before, then they should be baptized as believers.

Baptizo is the Greek word used for baptism in the New Testament, and it means to immerse. We practice baptism by immersion here because it is the most biblically accurate means of baptism. Since we are saved by faith in Christ and Him alone, a person who was sprinkled or had water poured over his or her head cannot be judged by the mode of his or her baptism. Yet we Baptists are sticklers over baptism by immersion, and since it is in our bylaws, we ask those coming into our fellowship from other denominations, if they have not been baptized as believers, by immersion, to demonstrate their faith and obedience to Christ by undergoing biblical baptism by immersion. Why?

In most instances of sprinkling, the baptism occurred when a prospective new member was an infant, and thus unable to make a free will commitment to Christ. Many of those denominations who sprinkle have certain doctrines that we believe are not in line with the teachings of the gospel, so even if an adult was sprinkled as a believer, being immersed in

believer's baptism shows an agreement and commitment to the fundamental doctrines of our faith, and enjoins them to the local body of believers.

In the case of the disciples in our text, their baptism of repentance still had effect, for it demonstrated their commitment to turn from sin. It also became a spiritual stepping-stone that helped them arrive at a faith relationship with Jesus Christ.

With the advance of the Charismatic movement, we have brothers and sisters in Christ who hold to the doctrines of speaking in tongues, and in the transfer of spiritual power by the laying on of hands. This is one of the primary proof texts for these practices. If we take these verses in isolation, we might arrive at the same conclusions, but when we consider the whole book of Acts, and the whole Bible, in context, we see the error in those doctrines.

The literal translation of the word sometimes offered as tongues, is more accurately translated as languages. We have seen this in our other passages of our study in Acts, and it is true here as well. The transfer of the Holy Spirit by laying on of hands, and then the recipients speaking in tongues, was a sign of a new people group being accepted into the kingdom of God. The only mention in the Bible apart from what we find in Acts is where Paul writes to the church in Corinth, because their practice of speaking in other languages in worship services had become a distraction.

Salvation has never been a function of speaking in tongues. Jesus never spoke to the issue. Nowhere in the Bible is it commanded. It was not a part of Paul's theology, nor did the other authors of the New Testament address it. It was not an issue in the early church after the gospel spread to all people groups in that day. We do not teach or encourage speaking in tongues in our church. But, on the other hand, I think we must be respectful of those who do. Members of charismatic churches express their faith as they have been taught. If they belong to Jesus, we must receive them as brothers and sisters in faith, but at the same time, protect the doctrines we hold dear, which come from a contextual understanding of God's word.

We do not impart the Holy Spirit by laying on hands, but there is a spiritual dynamic involved when spirit-filled people, agree with the Spirit in praying for others, or commissioning them into the Lord's service. It is not as if we have magical powers, but the human touch can be a powerful affirmation to the person who is the object of our prayer.

As a testimony to Paul, and the world, these twelve men received the Holy Spirit, spoke in other languages, and prophesied. They began to proclaim the truth of the gospel, and the word of God, as the Spirit moved them to speak. They were good men, on the right path to a full understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Once saved, they had a full commitment to the Lord and began their service and ministry in His name.

In the last three verses of this section we see a familiar pattern. Paul went to the synagogue and boldly preached the gospel. I feel certain that he reached many of them or he would not have preached there for three months. When the Jews became stubborn in the lack of faith and began to speak evil against the church, Paul left them, and began to preach in the hall of Tyrannus. This was a meeting place where people were free to speak about philosophy and to explore new ideas, similar to what we read about the Aeropaus in Athens.

As a result of Paul's two-plus-year ministry in Ephesus, the gospel thoroughly spread throughout Asia. As a side note, this would primarily be in the area of modern day Turkey, where lie the seven churches mentioned in the book of Revelation.

The message for us today is that so long as we are faithful to share the gospel wherever the Lord plants us, the gospel will continue to spread. There will always be opposition, but there is great victory, and rejoicing in heaven, over every person reached. The good news we share is

that God loves every sinner, and He made the sacrifice necessary in order for us to be forgiven of our sins. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, His sacrifice, and His resurrection from the grave. Ask the Lord to forgive you of your sins, and receive Jesus into your heart as Savior and Lord, and you will be saved, born again, sealed by His Spirit, and you will inherit eternal life. May it be so for everyone who hears this gospel.