

Acts

Acts 19:9-20 - How the Kingdom of God becomes real

In **Acts 19:8** Paul took three months to “argue persuasively about the kingdom of God.” But why all of a sudden had that now become Paul’s priority, rather than proving from Scripture that Jesus was the Messiah? And why take that long to argue persuasively too? And why did it **need** to take that long?

Well, Paul had just met a dozen or so disciples in Ephesus who had no clue about the Holy Spirit or why receiving the Holy Spirit was necessary. They, just like Apollos, “knew only the baptism of John” (Acts 18:25). None of them, therefore, had experienced the baptism with the Spirit, or even realized this baptism had kicked in since Jesus’ death and resurrection. And up to this point in Acts 19, no one had explained to them what this baptism was for, but nor had they asked what it was for either, despite John mentioning in Matthew 3:11 that “one coming after him more powerful than him” would “baptize them with the Holy Spirit and fire.” So they’re all happily motoring through life thinking John’s baptism of repentance was all they needed to know.

Even Apollos with his “thorough knowledge of the Scriptures” that had enabled him to “teach about Jesus accurately” (Acts 18:24-25) - and even identify Jesus as the Messiah (verse 28) - hadn’t cottoned on to the connection between Jesus and the baptism with the Spirit. But why was it so important to make that connection?

Well, that’s what Paul took three months to explain. And it all came down to showing them in the most persuasive, convincing way that it had everything to do with “the kingdom of God.” To our ears that may not mean much, but to the Jews in the audience it was a great way of helping them make the connection, because they’d known all their lives that the kingdom of God was at the heart and core of God’s plan.

Their scriptures were full of it, like **Daniel 7:14-15** and the “son of man” being given “authority, glory and sovereign power” over “all peoples, nations and men of every language,” and “his kingdom” lasting forever. And **verse 27** too, that this greatest of all kingdoms would also “be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High.” The kingdom of God, therefore, and their very personal participation in it, was the reason for the Jews’ existence and why God had made them his chosen people.

That's why it was so important to Paul to prove to his fellow Jews that Jesus was that "son of man" and the Messiah. It needed to be put in place first, because the Jews were still having trouble believing Jesus was the Messiah. Because in their minds, how could a Messiah - predicted by Daniel to have "sovereign power" - be crucified? None of their highly regarded teachers had taught such a thing either. Maybe Jesus wasn't the Messiah after all, then, and they had longer to wait for his arrival.

But what woke those Jews up was Paul's evidence from their very own scriptures (which Peter also spoke about in Acts 2:22-31) that Jesus truly was the Messiah, who died, yes, but he'd been resurrected from the dead too.

Having got that established, it was now time to move on. The "times of ignorance" were over (Acts 17:30). It was time to cotton on to what the resurrected "son of man" was up to since his resurrection. Well, Daniel had made that clear too, that the Messiah had been given power by the Father to establish the everlasting, indestructible kingdom of God on this planet. But the fact that he'd already been resurrected meant **it had already begun**. Jesus was already on the job setting up God's kingdom, therefore, which he confirmed in **Mark 1:15** when he announced, "The time has come. **The kingdom of God is near.**" And off he went to spread that "good news" all through Judea.

But where was the obvious evidence of the kingdom of God being near? Well, at the end of Jesus' ministry he told his disciples they would be "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49), because the next stage in God's plan was to make **THEM** the evidence of Jesus establishing the kingdom of God on this planet. **They** would now be "witnesses" to it happening (verse 48).

How? By their "baptism with the Holy Spirit," **Acts 1:5**. When Jesus' disciples asked him if he was going to restore the kingdom of God to Israel" there and then, he replied, in essence saying, "Not in full power yet, only the Father knows when that should happen," but meanwhile "you will receive power **when the Holy Spirit comes**" to make "YOU my witnesses" that I'm on the job establishing God's everlasting kingdom on this planet (verses 7-8).

Their participation in setting up the kingdom of God, then - as Daniel 7:27 had predicted - would actually start then, not at some later date. And how would they become participants in such an amazing job? By the "pouring out of the promised Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:33). Not by a symbolic burial in water like John's baptism, but by a soaking of Spirit power in Jesus' baptism with the Spirit. And this is how the kingdom of God would grow in the next stage of God's plan, through them as individuals filled with the Holy Spirit .

That's why it was so important to Paul to get those disciples in Acts 19:6 soaked in the Holy Spirit so they too could become participants with Jesus in the next stage of God building his kingdom, and be visible witnesses to it too.

But amazingly, even after his three month course “arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God” to shift those in Ephesus into the excitement of knowing they'd been given the power to participate and be witnesses, “some of them became obstinate,” and “refused to believe, publicly maligning the Way,” **verse 9**. To them this was all total rubbish.

Well, if three months of teaching couldn't convince them otherwise, “Paul left them” and “took the disciples with him” to a “lecture hall” instead, and set up “daily discussions” there for two whole years (verses 9-10), “so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord,” **verse 10**. Talk about power from the Holy Spirit being given.

And to make that power even more real and visible, “God did extraordinary miracles through Paul,” **verse 11**, which in his case included the curing of illnesses and evil spirits being cast out of people by bits of his clothing being taken to the sick (verse 12). “Handkerchiefs and aprons” were most likely sweat bands that people had back then because of the heat. So why would God choose to heal through Paul's sweat bands, of all things?

Well, it sounds like another humorous twist by the Holy Spirit, because in **verse 13** there were Jews (like the “seven sons of a Jewish high priest” in verse 14) thinking they could cast out evil spirits too by copying Paul. But when they tried saying, “In the name of Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you (the evil spirit) to come out,” the evil spirit replied, “Jesus I know and Paul I know about, but who are you?” (verse 15). And then to add injury to insult, “the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them” and “gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.”

What a visible and humorous contrast between the kingdom of God now at work and the best that evil could do. Paul's sweat bands were all that were needed to heal people compared to an entire occult system being reduced to nakedness and bleeding when it tried to heal people. And the obvious and visible contrast had the desired effect too, because “When this became known to the Jews and Greeks in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honour,” **verse 17**.

So this was the time all right for the Holy Spirit to make the kingdom of God real to people, and with highly visible witness to it too.

Because in **verse 18**, “Many of those who believed (in the obvious contrast between Paul’s power and ‘the powers that be’ in their world) now came and openly confessed their evil deeds.” Their stubbornness and obstinacy had crumbled and they were actually admitting they’d been wrong. There was a serious turning of the tide here, which must be encouraging to Christians in all ages when evil has blinded people into believing only their world and its narratives exist, and there is no other powerful dimension at work.

Well, yes there is another powerful dimension at work, and here we are today with that same Holy Spirit given to us for the same purpose of waking people up to it. The kingdom of God is very much on the move. It is relentless, and sometimes, as we see here in Ephesus, the Holy Spirit pops up and really proves it, because in **verse 19**, “A number who had practiced sorcery (occult magic arts) brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. Notice the word “publicly”? This was **visible witness**, the speciality of the Holy Spirit.

And to add another ironic twist to that visible witness, so people in all ages reading this story get to see how real the kingdom of God can be, these same sorcerers actually “calculated the value of the scrolls” they’d just burnt, “the total coming to 50,000 drachmas.” **verse 19**. In their terms a drachma was a day’s wage for an average labourer, so I imagine even they were surprised at how quickly and hugely the tide had turned against the obstinate and arrogant. And instead of their ridiculous rhetoric attempting to destroy Paul’s credibility, it had only increased it, because “the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power,” **verse 20**.

It dawned on me going through this story, then, that the Spirit’s visible witness to the kingdom of God has irony and humour attached to it too. Like the contrast between Paul’s accusers running around naked and injured, while those who’d trusted Paul had their illnesses completely healed by bits of his clothing. And on so many previous occasions the Holy Spirit had thwarted the plans of evil people to hinder the spread the kingdom of God, so that the power of the kingdom of God became even more visible and convincing.

Is the Holy Spirit doing that same thing in and through our lives too, then? Well, there’d be no point to these stories if it wasn’t. The whole point of the book of Acts is to provide a visible witness to the real and powerful existence and growth of the kingdom of God. And first of all that had to be made visible and real to us, Jew and Gentile alike, so that we believe it, and then realize the Spirit will do things in our lives as well that make the kingdom of God real to others. So expect surprises, and ironic and even humorous ones too, that make Jesus and his kingdom real and convincing. Because it’s THE speciality of the great gift of the Holy Spirit we now have living in and with us.